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NORMAN A. FOX

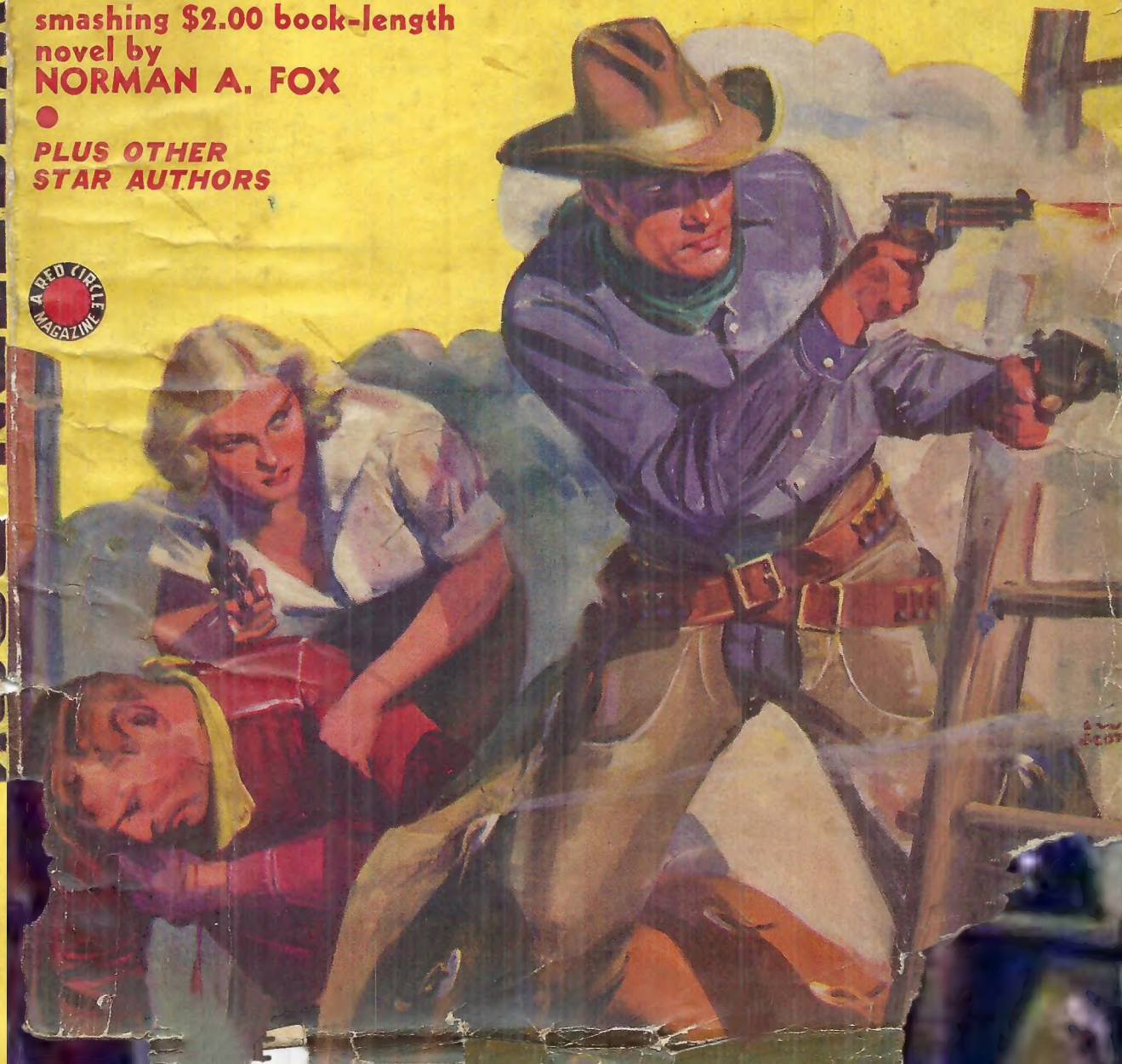
●

PLUS OTHER STAR AUTHORS

PRAY, COWBOY, OR GO FOR YOUR GUN!

by JAMES P. OLSEN

A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE



COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK

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COMPLETE

WESTERN BOOK MAGAZINE

WARD MARSHALL - EDITOR

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Vol. 12, No. 6 *September, 1940*

★ ★ DRAMATIC $2.00 BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL ★ ★ Page

THE KID GUNSIGHT RANGE CALLED KING

by Norman A. Fox 8

True, the bushwhacking and the rustling and the robberies coming all at once to Gunsight range might have borne the brand of Fate—Destiny might have smashed hot lead into the backs of honest men, and brought the stolen-beef scourge of the black-masked Legion wild bunch, and sent Jim Prince and his greased holsters down the doomed back-trail of those forgotten cowmen to seal their salvation in purgatory!

★ ★ THRILLING FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL ★ ★

Pray, Cowboy, or Go for Your Gun! 112

by James P. Olsen

The herd, the heat, the sweat, the dust and the long saddle hours would slow Shell Overlin's draw, he'd be slapping leather when this hell-town's hot lead was slamming him, but Shell Overlin would get the girl with the golden hair, he'd get the homestead too, he'd feel his two guns bucking in his two hands when the last snarling sidewinder face fell out of the powdersmoke!

★ ★ SMASHING ACTION NOVELETTE ★ ★

Man Who Stood in the Dust with Satan 102

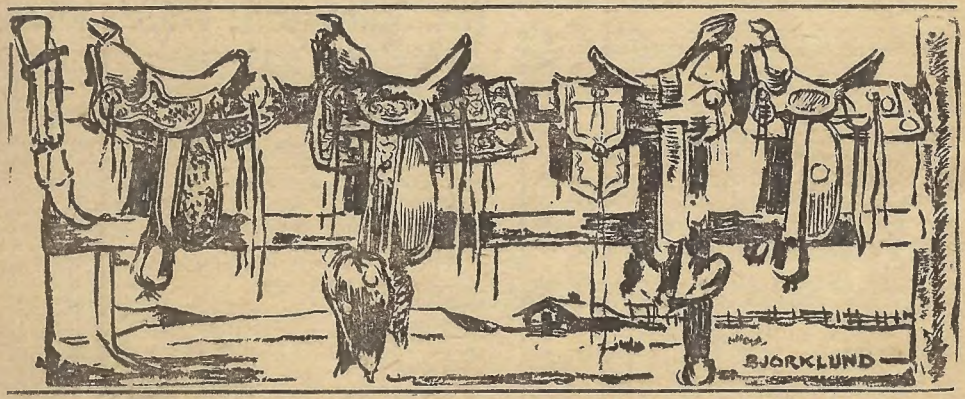
by Robert E. Mahaffay

Jim Rainbolt fought the same way he rode, like a hair-triggered slice of lightning, and if Sign-post beef still had to go onto free range behind guns, he'd back another Stormy River war!

★ ★ EXCITING SHORT STORY ★ ★

Six-Guns Appeal the Verdict.....by Rod Patterson 91

The law gave Joe Varine his gun and hat back, but Joe would hang both up in boothill before he'd redeem them beyond a hot-lead barricade!



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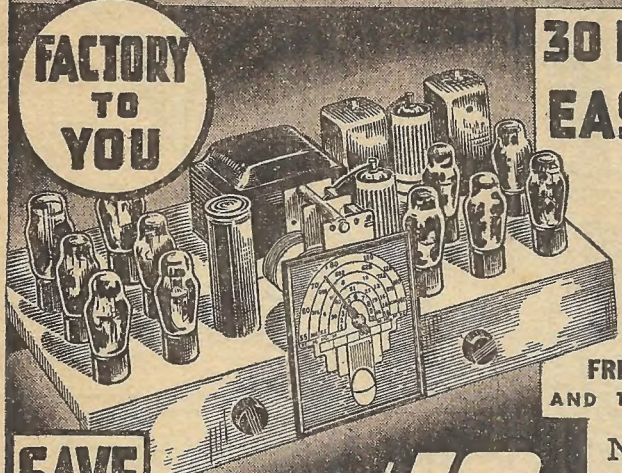

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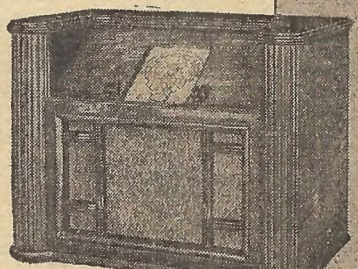

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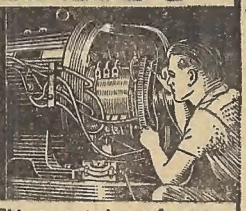

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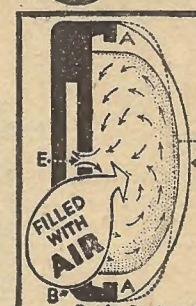

A—Pad which comes in contact with the body.
B—Light weight disc which holds pad.
C—Shows the shape of soft rubber pad before it is pressed against body.
D—Dotted line shows how the pad flattens out under pressure, expelling air.
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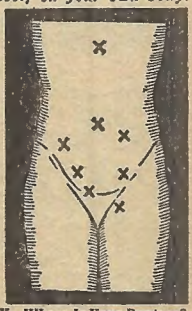

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Hot lead would smash into the backs of honest done, and Gunsight Range would know the wild bunch and the destiny that sent Jim Prince backtrail of those forgotten cowmen

Sunny Jim Prince squeezed hard on the trigger and saw another

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Called King

By NORMAN A. FOX

Author of "Range-Cubs Battle-Bargain," etc.

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foothills, vied with the rumble of thunder as nature voiced her wrath.

Cutting pellets of rain heralded the coming fury. In Gateway, the little town huddled at the foot of Sentinel peak, flickering lights defied the premature dusk, sent beacon rays to pierce the gloom. On the many trails that led to the town, riders were already spurring toward those murky yellow pin-points.

A mile out of Gateway rode a lithe young puncher who, tasting the rain upon his lips, urged his mount from a walk to a trot, his only concession to the threatening elements. Other riders might put steel to horseflesh. Sunny Jim Prince turned his good-natured face to the wind, felt himself thrilling to the wildness of the storm. A stranger to the Gunsight country, he had sighted the town ahead. He had nothing to fear but a drenching so he made no move to push his horse.

The rain became a steady, sheeted downpour. The cowboy reached for the slicker behind his saddle, carelessly draped the garment around his shoulders, tipped his cream colored sombrero over an eyebrow. Prince wore flashy clothes, eye-catching but totally inadequate for the trail. Chaps, black with silver mountings, seemed to be built for appearance rather than utility, while a shirt of vivid scarlet was scant protection against the chilling wind. The entire garb was incongruous—as out of place as his care-free boyish face in a land where men matured quickly. That face had fooled people. Fine-featured, almost effeminate in its shapings, it made the man look soft—too soft. Only the twin six-guns belted close to his narrow hips hinted that Jim Prince could take ample care of himself. Sturdy and serviceable, the guns were the real keynotes to the man himself.

He leaned, patted the horse affectionately. "What do you think of this,Tumblebug?" he asked the roan, voice soft as his appearance. "Summer ain't over and a nice storm's brewed up special-like for us. A right friendly country, you might say for . . ."

His remark died unfinished. A flash of lightning suddenly illuminated the scene with its chalky glare and the smile faded from Sunny Jim's face. Not five paces ahead a man sprawled face down in the trail, blood from a head wound mingling with the mud beneath him.

Thunder rolled back of the hills as the cowboy quickly dismounted. Striding to the prostrate figure, he rolled the body over and whistled softly at what the touch told him. The fellow had the warmth of life. Blood-matted crisp black hair indicated the location of the wound. That it had been sufficiently nasty to render him unconscious was self-evident, but the man was only wounded—not dead. In the grayish gloom Sunny Jim studied him intently. The man was tall, wide-shouldered, solid to the touch. He wore range garb. His face was grim, determined, but a face of indefinite age. Its owner might be thirty—might be fifty.

"Got to get him to town," the cowboy soliloquized, his own face harder now. "If the wound don't kill him, an hour on the trail will."

Sinking to one knee, he bent to raise the man. As he did so, a voice barked behind, arrested his motion. "Raise 'em!" some one commanded.

Jim rose, lifting his hands. It irritated him to think that he had heard no one approach but he had been too concerned with the discovery of the fallen man. His own conscience was clear but he didn't care to be caught napping under the circumstances. The man who had the drop on him might be the bushwhacker who had shot the man on the trail—and he might be here now to cover up his handiwork.

He turned slowly, faced a tall, stoop-shouldered man. Rain dripped from a flopping black sombrero, glittered on a sheriff's badge, spattered on a hand gripping a steady forty-five. A sandy moustache beneath a hawk-like nose bristled with rage as the sheriff's slate-gray eyes glared at Sunny Jim.

"Caught yuh red-handed, didn't I?" the oldster grated. "Bushwhacked Bert Harris, eh? Come like a sneakin' coyote and shot down as good a man as they is in Gunsight. They's just one thing that keeps me from shootin' yuh like the skunk yuh are. I've been itchin' tuh get my hooks on just one of yuh Whispering Legion snakes. Yuh're going to do plenty of talkin', hombre, before yuh stretch rope."

Jim, listening, tried to puzzle out the

meaning of his words. One thing was obvious enough. This lawman thought that he had ambushed the wounded man, but the rest of it was not so clear. Plainly there was more behind this affair than a mere gun-duel between two men that had laid one of them in the trail.

"If you'll take a look at my guns, Sheriff," the cowboy grinned, "you may be able to convince yourself they haven't been fired for a spell."

Suspicion flared in the lawman's eyes. "Nothin' doing," he retorted. "Buzz Pritchett is too old a hand to get caught lowerin' his own gun to look at another."

SUNNY JIM'S grin broadened. "You aim to stand here all night?" he asked. "If it wouldn't be changing the subject, like, I'd mention that the jasper lying there isn't dead but he's going to be if he ain't moved into town."

The sheriff snorted his disbelief, made no move. The situation deadlocked with Pritchett glaring at the cowboy, Jim smiling placidly back. The rain hissed sibilantly about them, almost muffled a deep groan as the man on the ground stirred restlessly.

The sheriff circled to Harris's side. Keeping an eye on Jim, the lawman kneeled just as Harris opened his eyes.

"Take it easy, partner," Pritchett cautioned him. "Yuh been bad hit—but I got the hombre that did it and yuh'll live to see him swing."

Harris rolled his head, eyed Jim. Steely-gray eyes ran over the cowboy's garb, lingered on his face.

"Something's wrong here, Sheriff," Harris muttered weakly. "That ain't the man that plugged me."

"Ain't the man?" Pritchett echoed.

"Naw. I saw the jasper. One of them black-masked Legion hellions did the job," Harris said slowly. He attempted to rise, fell back groaning.

"If you'll holster that cannon, Sheriff, I'll be helping you get that man into town," Jim offered.

Pritchett hesitated. The man was a slow-thinker and any accepted idea died hard with him. He had been convinced of Prince's guilt and he put his gun away with a dubious shake of his head. Together the two assisted Harris to his feet, loaded him on the sheriff's horse. They moved on down the trail in silence until a bulk loomed in the darkness. Harris, who lolled in the saddle steadied by Jim's hand, managed to raise his head.

"My cayuse," he announced. "Didn't reckon he'd be far away."

Pritchett swung into the empty saddle and with a man flanking Harris on either side, they went on to the town. The dingy, unpainted false-fronts of Gateway's main street were drab and cheerless in the downpour. No living creature was visible and the place had a dead, eerie air about it that made Jim unconsciously shudder. Only the murky yellow lights, hazy behind rain-streaked windows, evidenced that humans were about. Pritchett turned to Jim as they plodded up the street.

"Bert here is range-boss for the Bar-Z-Bar and I'm thinkin' old man Corrigan, his prod, is probably in town," the sheriff said. "I'm thankin' yuh, cowboy, for helpin' but before yuh leave town I aim tuh have a little talk with yuh. I'll be takin' Bert to the sawbones and lookin' up Corrigan. Suppose yuh hang around the Tivoli a spell." He jerked his thumb toward an unprepossessing edifice that flaunted a weather-beaten sign lettered "Saloon."

"Certainly, your honor," Jim grinned. "Me, I'm always at the disposal of forces of law and order, regardless of my personal opinion of some of the representatives of said forces."

Pritchett scowled but kept silent as the cowboy turned off toward the saloon. Without a backward glance, Jim dismounted, strode through the bat-wing doors.

The interior of the place was almost as dark as the street. A dim lamp hung from the ceiling of the spacious room. Along one side of the wall ran a full-length bar and behind it a stolid-looking barkeep rotated his arm in an apathetic ritual of wiping. Chairs and tables were scattered about the room with no eye to order. In another hour the place would probably be packed as the rain drove customers from the surrounding trails. Now it was practically deserted. Three men occupied one table, well back in the deeper shadows of a corner.

Jim sauntered to the bar, removed his slicker and tossed it across the scarred mahogany.

"What'll it be?" the barkeep rasped.

Sunny Jim eyed him solemnly. "Me, I'm a distributor of temperance tracts," he avowed. "Look not upon the wine when it is red." He closed one eye in a ponderous wink. "Rye," he added.

But with the glass before him, he ignored the drink. Turning his back, he hooked one heel in the bar-rail, propped his elbows on the mahogany and glanced toward the trio at the table. He wondered if he might invite himself to join them. A few questions were burning inside the cowboy, questions that had to do with Buzz Pritchett's queer attitude. This Whispering Legion, for instance? What sort of organization was it, and why did the sheriff pounce on a stranger as a possible member? The barkeep did not seem inclined to garrulity and Jim wanted to know.

THE three sat hunched together, the two on either side garbed for the range but the center man wore a tight-fitting coat that stretched across his shoulders from the play of muscles beneath. A clean-shaven, thin, hawk-like face stared at Jim, two small dark eyes burning the cowboy. The fellow's sombrero was shoved carelessly back, revealing shiny black hair. At first glance the man was devilishly good-looking, but a second look showed that his eyes were a little too small, a speck too close-set, his nose a mite too thin and his lips not prone to laughter.

They sat in silence, fingering the drinks before them, but Sunny Jim sensed that they had been busy with talk before his arrival. There was no welcome in their gaze as they studied him. He was about to turn to the bar and attempt conversation with the barkeep when the doors swung open and the sheriff entered. Pritchett clumped across the floor straight for Jim.

"Harris is all right," the lawman said without prelude. "Just a nasty scratch that put him to sleep for awhile. He saw enough 'fore he flickered out to know yuh wasn't the man that turned loose on him, but I aim to ask yuh a few questions, hombre. First, what's yore name?"

"Prince," Jim replied.

"Prince?" the lawman snapped. "Is that all they is tuh it?"

"Prince is a title," Sunny Jim told him in mock seriousness. "I'm a king's son out seeking my fortune. I can't get my rightful throne because my uncle, the black duke, put a curse on me. If you ever run into the duke, sheriff, just clap the cuffs on that jasper, will you?"

For a moment Pritchett stood in silence, mouth agape. Sunny Jim, imagining the workings of that slow-thinking brain, tried not to smile at the ludicrous picture the lawman made. He expected Pritchett to roar in rage, but the sheriff spoke calmly enough.

"Yuh seem to reckon I got no business pryin' intuh yore affairs," Pritchett said, "an' maybe I ain't. Yuh got no call tuh get smart with me, son. I asks these questions of every stranger."

"Why?" Jim asked quietly.

"Because every man's guilty till he proves he ain't."

"Guilty? Of what?"

"Of belongin' tuh the Whispering Legion!"

"And what in tarnation is the Whispering Legion?" Jim demanded.

"The Whispering Legion," said the sheriff, "is a bunch of devils straight from hell, a pack of murderin' rats that's gun fodder for any honest man. Whoever shot down Bert Harris belonged to the Legion."

Sunny Jim whistled. "Maybe I spoke out of turn, Sheriff," he acknowledged. "Here's my yarn. Name: James V. Prince. Address: Bent J spread, Flathead country. Business: seeing the world. Heading: nowhere. Never been near Gateway before. Never shot Bert Harris. Never heard of your confounded Whispering Legion. Never chew, smoke, drink, gamble or eat between meals."

Pritchett listened, studied Sunny Jim in silence and then, with a grunt, turned on his heel and left the room. A chorus of guffaws from the three at the table followed his exit. Jim bobbed in a quick bow.

"Cowboy, have a drink with us," the hawk-faced man invited.

Lifting his glass, Jim crossed the room, took a chair at the table. The hawk-faced man smiled genially. "Here's betting you have Pritchett staying awake tonight trying to unravel what you told him," he said.

"I shore didn't aim to mix him up," Jim smiled.

"My name's Taggart," the hawk-faced man announced. "This big hombre is Bull Jepson. The jasper on my left is Kurt Sabin."

Sunny Jim acknowledged with a general nod. Jepson was thick-necked, bullet-headed, with gorilla-like arms, while Sabin was almost the opposite in build, a slender, rat-eyed fellow of about Jim's size. The cowboy rather regretted that he had sat down. Something about Taggart and his companions jarred him and this was especially true of the hawk-faced man. Jim sensed that Taggart had called him over for a purpose, that everything Taggart did was for a purpose. The man was cool, calculating. It showed in the tightness of his mouth.

"This Whispering Legion?" Jim asked. "What's it?"

TAGGART laid long, well-kept hands, gambler's hands, on the table. "The Legion," he replied, "is Buzz Pritchett's private nightmare and I'm thinking it's mostly hokum. True enough, there's been a lot of trouble in Gunsight lately. Robberies, bush-whacking, rustling and the like, but it's probably just an unorganized outburst. The sheriff's got it in his head that one gang is behind it all, a masked crowd that he or someone has dubbed the Whispering Legion. Sounds loco to me."

Jim framed another question, but the door burst open again before he spoke. Fury marked this new entrance. The cowboy half-turned in his chair and, at first glance, he thought a boy had entered, for the newcomer wore bibless overalls and blue work shirt beneath a slicker. But an oval, haughty face told the truth. A girl, a very angry girl, was heading straight for their table, blue eyes flashing fire.

Admiration surged through Jim as he watched her stride across the floor. When she swept a sombrero from her head, close-cut auburn hair shone in the lamp light. She was very pretty, he decided, and her fury seemed to accentuate her beauty.

She stopped abruptly. "Taggart," she snapped, "I've come here to tell you something, and I want you to chalk it down where you won't forget it. Bert Harris, dad's range-boss, was shot from ambush today. He doesn't know who did it, and I'm not accusin' you. Just to play on the safe side, I'm telling you that I'm giving our boys orders to shoot if they catch you or any of your Boxed Z crew skulking around our spread. Do you understand?"

Taggart half rose, hands clutching the edge of the table. Jim realized that the man was boiling inwardly, but only the whiteness of Taggart's knuckles betrayed him.

"Miss Corrigan," he began, "you know . . ."

"Sure, I know you wouldn't stoop to such a thing," she finished for him. "You play the respectable rancher pretty well, but spare me an encore, please. Maybe I haven't got enough proof to go to Buzz Pritchett, but I'm betting half of what's left of the Bar Z Bar herd that you and your crowd are the backbone of the Whispering Legion!"

"The Whispering Legion," Sunny Jim reflected aloud, "seems to be the only thing anybody talks about in this man's town."

The girl flashed him a look of withering scorn. "Bert told me some fancy dressed rider had gotten himself into trouble by being around today," she flared. "I meant to apologize on behalf of the ranch if I saw you. Considering the company I find you keeping, I'm thinking maybe Bert went color-loco from the wound and can't tell a black mask from a rainbow."

Before Sunny Jim could frame a word of defense, she turned on her heel, strode across the room and out. Bull Jepson laughed uproariously as the door hinges creaked angrily from the viciousness of her departure.

"Yuh're quite a talker, cowboy," the giant boomed, "but the hell-cat went yuh one better."

But Sunny Jim wasn't listening. His thoughts were with the girl who had given him the tongue lashing—the girl who thought he was an associate of Taggart's. He wanted to correct that impression. "I'm going after her," he announced as he came to his feet.

"Why?" Taggart demanded.

The bluntness of the question stiffened the cowboy. There was something arrogantly commanding about Taggart's tone, something that tensed Jim. He swung on the man, flashed him a dazzling

smile.

"She might have to walk across a mud puddle," he told the Boxed Z man. "If I was right handy, I could maybe lay down my slicker for her."

And snatching a slicker from an empty chair beside him he dashed from the saloon. Kurt Sabin's voice shouted as the doors closed behind and he grinned with the sudden realization that he had taken Sabin's slicker in place of his own which still lay across the bar. No time now to stop for an exchange if he wanted to find the Corrigan girl. The rain still hung its drab curtain and darkness blanketed the street.

The girl had disappeared in that inky void. Pausing in the shelter of the saloon's eaves, Jim gave the matter thought. What difference would it make if he found her and explained? He would be on the trail again with morning, would probably never see her again. And yet . . . ? He thought of the trio inside. What was behind the enmity of the two ranches represented by the Corrigan girl and Taggart? And how did this Whispering Legion fit?

It was none of his affair, but, prompted by some vague urge, Jim groped his way along the side of the building toward the rear. If he had gauged Taggart and his friends correctly, the trio would be discussing the girl's outburst at this very moment. Jim found a window that lifted to his touch.

HE crept inside a room that smelt of beer kegs and quietly removed his boots. The room was black, but light streaming through cracks outlined a door. Feeling his way gingerly across the room he neared the door, heard the faint rumble of voices. Sunny Jim knelt, placed an ear to the keyhole.

He was in a storeroom at the rear of the saloon. Taggart, Jepson and Sabin sat not six feet from him, separated only by the flimsy door. Jepson's voice boomed louder than the others'. ". . . we can't get away with making war on women," Jim heard him say.

Then Taggart spoke. Straining his ear, Sunny Jim managed to catch the words. "It's liable to be her neck or ours, you fool," the Boxed Z man snapped. "It's plain enough that she suspects too much now. Remember what she said about the Legion?"

"What's your idea, boss?" Sabin cut in.

"It's simple," Taggart explained. "Quent Quayle is aiming to sneak a mine pay-roll up the mountain on the regular stage anytime now. The word will be passed to one of us—maybe tonight. When it happens, we'll lift the money and leave tracks straight for the Bar Z Bar. That spread has been hard hit. It needs money and everybody knows it. We'll plant the loot on the spread and put a bug in Buzz Pritchett's ear that Helen Corrigan done the job. That'll sound reasonable enough considering that the hell-cat does a man's work in every other line and Pritchett is just stupid enough to lock the girl up while he's thinking it over. With the girl in jail, we'll start piling up evidence enough to make it plenty hot for her. We'll be losers on the pay-roll money, but what of it? Think of the stakes we're playing for. Think what Jeff Corrigan will do when it starts to look like his daughter is going to Deer Lodge!"

"He'll head for his Showdown mine!" Sabin hissed in sudden understanding. "He'll go get hisself a load o' gold to fight the case."

"And we'll be following him," Taggart finished.

Sunny Jim had heard enough—enough to make him wonder at the queerness of chance that had guided his footsteps to this place at this time, enough to know that he'd be taking a hand in this game for reasons that couldn't be put into words. Crossing the room, he retrieved his boots, slipped through the window.

He pulled Sabin's slicker close as the rain buffeted him, turned the corner of the saloon and almost collided with a man who hurried through the gloom. For a fleeting second lightning flared across the sky, revealed a form shapeless beneath a slicker. Then darkness blotted out everything but a voice.

"That you Sabin?" the man grunted.

The slicker had fooled the fellow. Taggart's man had the brand of the Boxed Z painted on his slicker and this man had glimpsed it in that instant of light.

"Yes," Jim muttered.

"Pass the word," the man jerked. "Quayle's sendin' his pay-roll out with the stage in half an hour."

The man scurried on, left Sunny Jim standing undecided in the street. Here was the very information the three inside awaited. Everything was set to place Helen Corrigan in a trap.

He thought of the girl, pictured her again as she had stood in the saloon hurling her angry ultimatum. One lone girl who dared to defy Taggart and the evil forces he seemed to represent. A girl who was going to be framed if something wasn't done this very night.

Maybe something could be done. Returning to his horse, Jim mounted and headed down the street, scanning each building as he passed it. At the first livery stable he turned inside. A shrill voice arrested him as he thrust his way into the dark warmth of the place.

"What'll yuh have, hombre?" it demanded.

A lantern bobbed from the far end, carried by a grimy boy of about fourteen. Jim smiled down upon him. "I want to leave Tumblebug here for a spell," he told the button. "I'm aiming to ride the stage up the mountain tonight."

Eyes widened in the boy's quizzical face. "Say, are you a pay-roll guard?" he asked. "I heard tell Quent Quayle was gettin' one."

"Not me," Sunny Jim replied as he swung from the saddle. "I'm just an old war-horse, son. An old war-horse that's smellin' the smoke of battle and rarin' to go!"

CHAPTER II

The Legion Strikes

RAIN-hammered, the Gateway stage wormed slowly up the mountain, tenaciously following a road that sometimes skirted the edge of pine-studded slopes that allowed brief glimpses of the town's lights far below, and sometimes lost itself in a tangle of ravines that split the sides of the mighty peak.

Perched beside the driver, Sunny Jim sat with chin buried in Sabin's slicker and named himself several brands of idiot. He did not regret that he had chosen to champion Helen Corrigan, but he was beginning to wish that he had figured a better plan of action than plunging into a miserable journey on this hell-swept night in order to be on hand to circumvent Taggart's plan.

But each mile convinced him that nothing else could have been done. He might have gone to Buzz Pritchett with his story, but he doubted whether such an action would have been beneficial. If the sheriff listened to him at all, after his flippant attitude when the two had talked, the most Pritchett could do would be to load the stage with deputies to forestall attack. Such a move might have been sufficient to warn the outlaws. Only by playing a lone hand could Jim hope to strike a blow at the forces who were out to frame the girl.

He had chosen to ride beside the driver because he wanted information and he had a hunch his companion could supply it. Having definitely decided to take a hand in the game, Jim intended to play it through. All he could learn about the trouble that rode the Gunsight country might prove helpful.

Bony hands clutching the reins, the driver crouched beside him, a wiry lath-like fellow, weather-beaten by many years of bucking wind and rain. Little eyes that were almost lost beneath bushy brows glued on the dim trail while a lantern jaw rotated ceaselessly as the man chewed plug-tobacco. Jim had catalogued the driver in town, sizing him up as a garrulous oldster. In the first miles of the trip the cowboy had been disappointed. Busy with the horses, the man maintained a silence that was almost belligerent and it was not until they were many miles out of Gateway and the trail topped a grade to settle to a level run that the man relaxed and became companionable.

"Ain't of'en as how I has any company on these here trips," he complained. "Shore gets lonesome."

"Don't many go this way?" Jim invited.

"Not lately," the driver ruminated and spit dexterously with the wind. "Used to be I'd haul two-three jaspers up old Sentinel every trip. Gettin' so folks is afraid to ride with me."

"Don't seem to be anything wrong with your driving," Jim commented in deliberate misunderstanding.

The man snorted. "Ask anybody in Gateway and they'll tell you as how 'Chew-Tobacco' Chaney could take a ten-span through hell without gettin' the hubs hot. It jist happens that I pack a mine pay-roll up the hill every once in awhile. A bunch of hellions has stopped me so of'en that folk's is plumb afraid to ride."

"Holdups, eh? Why don't they send guards along with you when you carry money?"

Chaney chuckled. "Quent Quayle, the hombre that owns the mine, has tried everything under the sun to pertect hisself. When he loads the jerky down with guards, the owl-hooters don't show up. If he tries sneakin' the pay-roll up unexpectedlike, they always know when. Seems like whenever Quayle plans something to fool 'em, they know about it before he's through thinkin'. The Whispering Legion has got lots of ears."

"The Whispering Legion?" Jim echoed. "What are they? I'm a stranger hereabouts."

"I ain't sayin' it's the Legion," Chaney modified cautiously. "Sometimes I've been stopped by one man—sometimes by a dozen. They all wear black masks. Critters masked like that have struck all over Gunsight. Some says as how they's one big gang workin' the section and some calls it the Whispering Legion. How's a jasper gonna tell? They say the gang's got spies everyplace. That's how-come Quayle can't fool 'em. A heap of men work for Quayle. Maybe some of them belong to the Legion, too. They're shore-enough whisperers. Nobody's ever said a word which might kinda prove that they knew anything about them. They're plumb quiet-like."

"Is this fellow Quayle up at the mine?"

"Jumpin' Jehosophat, no!" Chaney ejaculated. "Quayle never leaves Gateway. Got an office and they ain't a dozen times that anybody's ever seen him out of it."

"Must be a queer one," Jim reflected.

CHANEY shot him a surprised look. "Say, you must be a stranger alright, seein' as how you don't know about Quent Quayle," the driver reflected. "The man owns more than any other two in Gunsight. Got his mine up the mountain and a ranch in the valley. 'King of Gunsight' they calls him. Built his holdin's up from nothing and the hombre is blind—stone blind!"

"Blind!"

"Yep. Stumbled intuh Gateway five years ago on a cayuse that looked like poor pickin's for the crows, and his Chinaman loaded on a burro twice as old. Both of 'em so ragged a breeze woulda stripped 'em. Quayle pulls up in front of the Tivoli and turns them sightless eyes on the Chink. 'Sing,' says he, 'what sort of place is this?' That slant-eyed devil of his spills out about ten words and Quayle unloads from the kak. 'We'll stay here for a spell, Sing,' says he. That's how Quent Quayle showed up in Gateway. Five years ago.... I was drivin' my own stage, then. Now he's King of Gunsight and I drive stage for him."

"Mighty interesting," Jim drawled. "I'd like to meet him."

"You won't be forgettin' him if yuh do," Chaney advised. "Quayle's got a face that folks remember. Hideous, that's what he is. But I don't reckon yuh'll be seeing him. I've drawed his pay for three years and I've only clapped eyes on him twice."

"How the devil does he take care of his holdings if he plays hermit?"

"By sittin' in his office and thinkin'," Chaney explained. "When he gits an idea, he tells the Chink about it and he passes the orders along to us galoots." He spat emphatically. "How would yuh like tuh have to take orders from a yellow-skinned, slant-eyed son o' sin in a white man's country? Sing is eyes for Quayle—and mouth, too. Yuh only see the boss when the business is special-like. He sent for me when the stage started gettin' stopped regular.

"The Chink shows me intuh the office, walkin' along soft as a cat. There sits Quayle behind a table he uses for a desk—him with all his money in a hole of an office that ain't fit for a coyote's den. There he sits, I say, with a sawed-off shotgun laying across the table so he could blast the whole damn room if he wanted to. 'Chaney,' he jerks and he's got a voice like a file across steel, "you've been stopped pretty often with my pay-roll.' 'It shore ain't my fault, boss,' I begins, figgerin' on explainin'-like. He waves his hand. 'Shut yore face,' he tells me,

'and watch yourself.' That's all. The Chink tugs at my sleeve, points to the door. I was plumb anxious tuh leave. Stayin' in there was like being buried alive."

The stage struck another uphill grade as Chaney finished his recital and the driver lapsed into another silence as he fought the horses along the perilous route. Jim huddled against him, ruminated on the information he had received. This Gunsight country was darn interesting, he reflected. The story of Quent Quayle made it more so. There were currents and cross-currents here that aroused his curiosity.

The rain increased in fury. Jim judged that they must be better than half way up the mountain, so, with a word to Chaney, he swung easily from his perch to one of the side-steps. Fighting against the wind, he managed to open the door, crawl inside the coach.

Sometime before they reached the mine, the Whispering Legion was going to strike. Jim planned to let matters follow their natural course when the attack came, but he wanted to be in an unhampered position if a chance for action afforded itself. Inside the stage he would not have to be worried that anything he might do would jeopardize the driver.

There was an even chance that Taggart and his men had not gotten the news of the pay-roll's departure and so might not put in an appearance. On the other hand, the spy who had whispered the information to Jim had said, "Pass the word along," which indicated that others were to be informed. Jim wondered if they had learned that at least one man had received the tip who was not a part of the organization.

In any case he was ready and waiting —and developments came very soon. The stage topped this newest upgrade, struck another level stretch, jolted around a curve. Muffled by the downpour, a gun cracked close by and the stage jerked to a bone-jolting stop.

Lightning flared as a horseman stepped from behind the concealment of a giant boulder, covered the coach with a menacing six-gun. Jim had a brief glimpse of glittering eyes peering from circular holes in a black mask that fitted snugly over the rider's head. A slicker concealed the man from neck to heels but Sunny Jim guessed from the bulk that the horseman was Bull Jepson if it were any of the three he had met at the saloon.

And with the identification, Jim also realized that Chew-Tobacco Chaney had made his last trip for Quent Quayle. If the Legion planned on carrying out its plot by laying the blame for this night's work at the door of Helen Corrigan, they would have to silence the driver forever. Chaney might not know the identity of the robber, but he could certainly testify that the beefy holdupman was not the girl from the Bar Z Bar. The same reasoning applied to Jim, himself. His presence sealed his own doom unless he could become master of the situation.

THE outlaw's gun pointed at Chaney. "You know what I want," the man snapped. "Toss it down—pronto."

Jim heard Chaney move above, heard him raise the driver's seat which was a hinged lid to a compartment beneath. The man grunted with an effort of lifting. A heavy box landed on the ground, slithered in the mud of the roadside.

"You, inside, unload yourself," the masked man ordered and placed a shot through the coach.

The lead zinged ominously close, thudded into the wood of the far wall—and gave Sunny Jim an idea. With a howl of anguish, he grasped his left hand, lurched from the stage out into the road. Doubled up with a semblance of pain, he continued to clutch his wrist as he staggered forward a step or two on shaky legs. The movement brought him almost to the side of the outlaw.

"Got yuh, eh," the man grated and Jim jerked into action. Hands darting out, he grabbed for the wrists of the outlaw, twisted the man's gun hand to one side, pulled. The effort yanked the rider from his horse. Jim fell on top of him as the man struck the ground.

The cowboy was convinced that his adversary was Jepson as they came to close grips and he realized that he had his hands full in tackling such a man. But the advantage of surprise was on the side of Sunny Jim. Thinking that he had disabled the passenger, Jepson had been totally unprepared for the sudden assault the cowboy had launched. Claw-

ing desperately, Jim twisted the gun from the big man's grip, got to his feet and backed away.

"Chaney," he shouted hoarsely. "Load that payroll on again."

He kept eyes and gun fastened on the darker blotch smeared against the night that indicated Jepson was scrambling to his feet. He did not dare turn his head to see if Chaney were hurrying to retrieve the pay-roll for, in this uncertain gloom, such a move would give the outlaw a chance to rush him.

Jim's eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness. He saw the outlaw standing at bay, hands half raised. "Hurry!" he urged Chaney. Jepson might have come alone which would mean that Jim definitely had the upper hand, but the cowboy had a hunch that other members of the dread Legion lingered near—might be coming to their fellow's rescue even now. Chaney's feet scraped against the hub of a wheel as the driver dismounted from his perch.

Then Sunny Jim had the biggest surprise since his arrival in the Gunsight country. Chew-Tobacco Chaney had hinted at the ramifications of the Whispering Legion. The driver had mentioned that any man might possibly be a member of the organization. Jim realized, too late, just how much truth had been behind the man's words. For Chaney, instead of dashing for the fallen pay-roll box, launched himself on Jim's back. One hand grasped the cowboy's gun, twisted it to one side.

"Grab him! Quick!" the driver gasped. "I can't hold him forever!"

CHAPTER III

The Hell-Cat Again

CHEW-TOBACCO CHANEY, with his years against him, was no match for Sunny Jim. His immediate cry for assistance proved that the driver knew his limitations. But futile as his efforts might be, they could easily prove Jim's undoing, for Jepson was plunging forward, head down. And help was coming from another quarter, too. The rain's sibilant hiss dimmed all sound, but Jim's ears caught the muffled hoofbeats of galloping horses somewhere close. Here on this lonely road it could mean only one thing. Honest men were behind walls on such a night. Only the Whispering Legion rode with the storm.

Chaney clung to Jim's back, one arm wrapped about the cowboy's neck while the driver struggled for the gun with his free hand. Bending forward, Jim heaved, catapulted Chaney over his head, sent the man thudding to the ground. He had accomplished the act with no particular design in mind, his only thought being to free himself from Chaney; but the trick had unexpected results. Jepson, lurching into the fray, was unable to stop his rush. The big bandit stumbled over the form of Chaney,sprawled headlong to the ground.

For a moment the two men were a confused tangle of arms and legs and that moment was long enough for Jim to decide that discretion would outdo valor this night. The approaching horsemen were very near, the thunder of hoofs unmistakable. Jim turned, scooped the pay-roll box from the ground, tucked it under an arm and leaped behind the stage coach.

Lightning flared wrathfully across the sky, lighted the surroundings with its blinding glare. Utter darkness followed the flash and thunder exploded around the peak, the reverberation ear-splitting in its nearness. But that instant of weird glow had shown Jim two things. Sharply etched against that chalky light, a dozen horsemen had loomed almost upon him—black masked horsemen, their slickers glittering with rain. And at Jim's feet was a slope that ran downward at a perilous slant for some seventy feet to end in a narrow ledge.

He would have shunned that slope in daylight but tonight there was no choice. Clutching the box firmly, Jim leaped, felt himself plunging outward and downward to strike feet-first a dozen feet below. He tried to slow himself, his heels striving to dig a foothold, but the grass that mottled the hillside was slippery with rain. He lost his balance, fell forward, rolled over and over, unable to stop. Clutching for a hold with his free hand, he careened down the slope, crashed into a clump of choke-cherry bushes on the ledge. He lay there for several minutes, panting and disheveled.

Guns stabbed the night, orange streaks flashing downward from the roadway far above. They gave Jim little worry. The marksmen were shooting at random, hoping they might score by luck. He felt reasonably sure that the men of the Legion would not attempt to follow him down the slope.

And so he waited, the rain beating through his clothes, soaking him to the skin. Minutes crawled by to the everlasting lashing of the storm. Without warning, another flash of lightning seared the sky. It revealed the fact that the ledge dropped off fifteen feet or so and another slope lay below, stretching on down into darkness. Under cover of the pitch that followed the lightning, he dropped over the edge and slid down the second slope. Once again he was stopped by bushes.

Slowly and painfully, he made his way down the mountainside by this method, working always toward the floor of Gunsight Valley. The sides of Sentinel were terraced by nature in a series of slopes and cliffs. Sometimes the going was easy as he found table-level stretches. But there were also ledges and drops that would make such a trip perilous even by daylight. With conditions as they were, he could only take his time, feeling along cautiously and taking advantage of the frequent lightning flashes.

He clung tenaciously to the heavy box in spite of the handicap made by the burden. Possession of the pay-roll represented success or defeat for his efforts. If he had left it behind and it had fallen into the hands of the Legion, they could have very easily carried out their original scheme with only his testimony to fear. But with the pay-roll out of their reach, it would certainly be impossible for them to plant it on the Bar Z Bar.

AS he reached the foothills clustering about the bottom of the giant peak, he began to watch for a suitable place to hide the box. He intended to turn it over to Buzz Pritchett later, but his sole aim now was to find a ranch on the valley's floor, get shelter for himself.

"If I lug this dog-gone thing another mile," he reflected aloud, "I'll be feeling that it's one hard-earned pay-roll."

It came to him that the rain had abated considerably. Thrashing about in the thick timber at the mountain's foot, he had been showered by every tree he had bumped in the dark. But as open spaces became frequent, he realized that the wind had died and the storm had lessened to a misty drizzle. Already a rain-washed moon was trying vainly to pierce the scudding clouds overhead.

He glimpsed a tall pine, solitary sentinel that marked where the foothills ended and the valley's floor began. It had been blasted by lightning that very night. Jim eyed the livid white scar gleaming through the mist. He had found a perfect landmark, a monument to mark the cache he would prepare.

Stooping, he began to scoop the dirt away at the foot of the tree. The wet earth moved easily. Working steadily, he soon had a good-sized cavity made. He placed the box in the hole, packed dirt around and above it until no signs of his handiwork remained.

Satisfied, he moved away. "That peeled bark will stand out like a broken nose," he reflected with a grin. "In the meantime, this waddy'll be moseying along. They say lightning never strikes twice in the same place, but maybe it might just to sort of prove the rule."

But the lightning had done all the damage it would do to the Gunsight this night. The flashes were dim and distant and the thunder echoed far away. The storm had spent its wrath here, moved on.

Once in the valley, the going was easier but Jim was heartily sick of walking. It seemed that he had done more footwork in the past few hours than in all the years since he had first learned to fork a cayuse on the Prince Bent J spread up in the Flathead country.

He began to wonder if Gunsight Valley had any human habitants as he plodded along, for miles had slipped behind. He had about decided to angle, skirt the edge of the foothills and seek the pass that led out to Gateway when the outlines of buildings loomed ahead, glimmering ghost-like in the feeble moonlight.

He had stumbled upon a ranch. As the distance shortened, he defined a huge rambling ranch house, an elongated bunkhouse not far away, horse corrals, a blacksmith shop, other outhouses. His path led him to the ranch house first.

No lights gleamed from any of the windows, which was natural since the night was far gone. Jim began to skirt the building, intending to head for the bunkhouse, which would be open to him by the unwritten law of range hospitality.

He paused abruptly before the ranch house. A saddled horse stood ground-anchored at the foot of steps leading up to a vine shrouded porch. The animal was drenched, bedraggled, and Jim eyed it curiously. What was it doing here? It appeared to be waiting a rider who had gone into the house—but the house was silent, ominously gloomy in the darkness.

Puzzled, Jim gazed about, shuddered involuntarily. There was something unnatural about the whole place, a feeling as though the ranch had been deserted—and for cause. Several cottonwoods studded the yard. A breeze rippled through their leaves, sent rain drops spattering him.

Turning, he strode toward the bunkhouse. Finding the door of the building slightly ajar, he stepped inside. Silence greeted him. No lusty snores evidenced that a hard-riding crew was enjoying a well-earned night's rest. Even before he fumbled for oil-skin wrapped matches, scratched one alight, he knew that the place was empty.

The bunks had been slept in recently, probably this very night, but the men who had been here were gone.

MORE mystified than ever, Jim stepped into the open again, walked back to the house. The horse was still there, keeping its lonely vigil. Passing the animal, he climbed the steps to the porch. Something was decidedly wrong here and he meant to find out what. If any human were about at all, that person was inside the house as the presence of the mount proved.

Jim tapped at the door, lightly at first, and then louder as he received no response. He paused, undecided. This wasn't one of those ranches deserted by an owner who had moved on to greener range and left to fall into ruin. From what he had seen of it, the place appeared to be well kept. A flagstone walk led around the house and the tufts of grass that grew between the flat rocks were clipped close. Flower beds bordered the porch and these, too, showed signs of recent care.

Boyish face grim now, Jim tried the door. It opened to his touch and he moved into a dark hallway. The rain, drumming lightly on the roof, seemed to echo inside the building. Groping, he found a door leading off the hall and stepped into what he guessed was a living room.

He hesitated inside the door, tried to accustom his eyes to the darkness, and as he did so a sound reached his ears. Someone had groaned—someone near by, in this very room. It made the short hairs along the nape of his neck grow rigid. That sound was in keeping with the spell cast by the entire place.

Smiling mirthlessly, Jim recovered himself, began to move cautiously across the room. He took only a few steps when he almost collided with a table. Groping fingers explored its surface, found a lamp. He sought his matches again and got the lamp aglow.

With the yellow light bathing the room, he turned to look for the source of the noise he had heard. The room was well furnished, a comfortable place with a huge stone fireplace squatting in a far corner, chairs grouped carelessly about and the table centering it all. But Jim paid little attention to the appointments. His eyes were riveted on the floor. For the second time since his arrival in the Gunsight country, Jim saw a man sprawled face downward, blood from a wound spilling about him.

One bounding stride took him to the man's side. Lamp light gleamed on a shiny bald head fringed with graying hair that ran crescent-like above the fellow's ears. The man was big, as big as Bert Harris who had lain on the trail, and stouter. It took effort to roll him on his back.

The task performed, Jim rose to one knee. He would explore the house, find a bed and move the man. He made a motion to rise to execute this plan and was startled by the front door banging open and shut again. Instinctively, his hand swept toward a holster, but before he reached it a figure loomed in the doorway to the room and he saw that he was covered by a gun.

Jim gasped. It was Helen Corrigan. Still clad in overalls and shirt beneath

her slicker, her sudden entrance paralleled her appearance at the Tivoli a few hours beefore. But the girl whom Bull Jepson had branded hell-cat had been merely angry at the saloon. Hate and wrath were mingling emotions that blazed from her eyes as her gaze swept from Jim to the man on the floor and back to the cowboy again. Knuckles gleamed white as she gripped the gun.

"So it's you again!" she snapped. "And up to devil's work, as usual!"

And truth burst like a bombshell in Jim's brain. He was on the Bar Z Bar! The girl's entrance proved that the place was her home. It followed that the man on the floor belonged here—was probably Jeff Corrigan, her father.

"Now just a minute, Miss," he drawled. "It sorta 'pears like you're making a mistake."

"Mistake!" she echoed and a sob broke in her voice. "The mistake was in not having you locked up over the Harris shooting. I don't know what you've done to my dad, but I'm going to see to it, here and now, that you never do another job for Black Jack Taggart. I'm going to give you the same kind of medicine your Legion has been passing out—in the same way. I'm going to shoot you down for the sneakin' snake that you are!"

CHAPTER IV

Forgotten Fortune

THE girl really intended to shoot. Sunny Jim, searching her anguish-twisted face, had no doubts on that score and, regardless of his own peril, he could not blame her. Some inkling of the persecution the Corrigans had undergone since the Whispering Legion had begun to ride had reached him. And twice now, fate had placed him under suspicion, events shaping themselves to make him appear a part of that sinister organization.

Finding her father wounded had been the last straw for Helen Corrigan, a hate-provoking discovery that had made her natural urge to hurry to his side secondary to the desire to avenge him. Jim, eyeing the distance between himself and the girl, knew he could never rush her and survive.

"Now just a minute, Miss," he attempted to stall. "You're going to be powerful sorry if you kill me."

"And why?" she demanded hoarsely.

"Because your dad, here, needs to be moved to a bed, taken care of. You can't do that alone, but I can help you."

For an instant her gun wavered, then steadied again. "Buzz Pritchett told me what a fast talker you were," she said with shaky laughter. "You can't talk yourself out of this."

A boot scraped in the hallway. "Holster that gun, Miss," a quiet voice ordered.

The girl spun at the sound and Jim gazed over her shoulder into the grim face of Bert Harris, whose wide shoulders filled the doorway. The foreman's black thatch peeped through a white head bandage, evidence of the wound he had received before Jim had first met him. One big hand reached forward, gently disengaged the gun from the girl's fingers.

Harris silently crossed the room to where Jim stood. He knelt beside the wounded man, examined him quickly. Then, slipping an arm beneath Jeff Corrigan's head and shoulders, he looked up to Jim. "Give me a hand," he requested.

Jim helped lift the unconscious figure. Helen darted to the table, raised the lamp and, holding it aloft, led the way into the hall. Jim wondered at the steadying influence of Harris, for the girl seemed to have forgotten her anger since his coming.

The shadows of the two men and their burden danced grotesquely on the wall as they followed the girl to a little ground-floor bedroom. With Corrigan placed on the bed, Helen disappeared in quest of water and bandages. While she was gone, Harris gently cut away the wounded man's vest and shirt. Jim heard the foreman's teeth click as he stared at the sight revealed. The bullet had struck Corrigan in the left breast, dangerously near the heart.

"I'll be riding for a sawbones," Harris told the girl when she returned. "Jeff's needing one."

Helen took the news in stone-like silence. She busied herself cleansing the wound, using whiskey for an antiseptic.

When the wound was bandaged, she forced whiskey through her father's lips. Corrigan choked, coughed and appeared to strangle. Then he opened pain-glazed eyes that roved from his daughter to his foreman and back again.

"What happened, Dad?" the girl asked, her eyes misty. "Bert and I stayed in town till the storm was over and got home about an hour ago. You were gone and none of the boys knew where. We all went out to look for you, separating to cover more ground. I came back first and found you here wounded. Bert came along shortly afterwards, but the rest of the boys are still searching."

That was why the ranch had been deserted, Jim realized. He saw one of Jeff Corrigan's hands steal across the bed covers, close upon his daughter's fingers.

"Helen-girl," the old man muttered weakly. "I got some bad news for you, and I'm askin' you to take it right—no cryin' or carryin' on. Promise?"

"I will, Dad," she agreed in a small voice. "I forgot myself when I first found you wounded, but it won't happen again."

"All my life I've either been dodging bullets or stopping them. The one I got tonight had my name on it."

"Don't be talking that way," Jim spoke up. "We'll get you a doctor and have you on your feet in no time."

Corrigan twisted, wincing with the effort, and glanced at Jim curiously. "Who is this rannie?" he wanted to know.

"This is a gent who always happens to be around when a Bar Z Bar man gets bushwhacked," Helen replied venomously. "It's mighty plain that he's the man who shot you."

CORRIGAN'S eyes burned brightly. "This buckaroo didn't have anything to do with what happened to me."

The old rancher had lost a lot of blood and it was plain that he had little strength to waste. "Better not talk much," Harris advised gently. "I'll be leaving, now, for the sawbones."

"You'll be wasting your time if you do," Corrigan retorted. "I'm still your boss, Bert, and I'm ordering you to stay here. I got some talking to do and I want you to be listening. And Helen, quit staring at that water-soaked rannie like you wanted to stab him. He didn't do nothing to me as you'll be able to see for yourself if you'll let me spill my yarn."

By his own admission, the man was dying, but Jim couldn't repress a grin as Corrigan snapped at the two. In one respect at least, the father and daughter were alike. Both had a forceful way of saying things.

"Some of the Whispering Legion plugged me," Jeff announced. "I ain't got any doubts, cause they come right here to the house and I saw 'em."

"To the house!" Helen echoed. "Why? What did they want?"

"They told me why they'd been bedevilin' the Bar Z Bar. They laid the cards out on the table."

Helen gave Jim a cold look. "Maybe this cowboy didn't shoot you, Dad, but I'm still believing that he belongs to the Legion. Maybe we'd better put him somewhere else while you speak your piece."

"Let him stay," Jeff decided. "If he's one of the Legion, what he hears won't be news. If he isn't, it doesn't make any difference. Besides, I like his looks. Let him be."

Face ghastly, he paused, then began to speak again. "Ever since a bunch of hellions started playing havoc around here we've been wondering why they singled out us to pick on. We figgered Taggart had a hand in the rustling and such when we found some of his Boxed Z crowd on our range. Then the sheriff started calling the trouble makers the Whispering Legion. Seems to be all the same thing. The point that always puzzled me was why they singled out us and Quent Quayle, while a lot of people was never bothered. Quayle has property and money, which naturally makes him a target for owl-hooters. But the Bar Z Bar ain't never been a treasure trove. Tonight, I found out what they've been after."

He smiled at Helen. "You didn't know your daddy owned a rich mine, did you, honey? I didn't think anybody knew, but I was dead wrong because it happens that the Legion is after the location of my Showdown mine."

Helen and Harris were visibly astonished, but not Jim. Taggart and his men had spoken of Showdown mine at

the Tivoli, had talked of forcing Corrigan to lead the way to the place. Because of that conversation, Jim had stepped into the game. Now he leaned forward eagerly, more interested in Corrigan's words than he cared to show.

"I kept the mine a secret for a reason, Helen-girl," Jeff went on. "To make my reason clear, I'll have to tell you about something that happened way back before you were born. I went into partnership with a couple of cowpokes, Sam Crousen and Tracy Varney, on a prospectin' trip. Maybe I've spoke of them sometimes?"

"I've heard you mention Varney, Dad."

"Probably. 'Taint likely I talked of Crousen 'cause I wanted to forget him. He was a queer critter, handsome as the devil and just as mysterious. Varney was an old saddle-mate of mine. He hauled me out of the Canadian when we were trail herdin' and we sorta stuck to each other after that. Tracy Varney was the best friend I ever had. Crousen was a stranger to me, but Tracy had knowed him in Texas. The three of us joined up one summer.

"Tracy and me didn't have no gold fever. He'd gotten hisself married and I was keepin' company with your mother at that time. We both wanted a stake to build up herds of our own. We thought we might be lucky and get it the quick way—and we did.

"The part of the yarn about how we stumbled on the gold ain't important and I'm going spare on the words. What counts is that we had enough gold for our needs before winter set in, so we went to the nearest town, which happened to be Gateway. Tracy and me started lookin' for beef and when spring came we was too busy to think about going back to the mine. In the meanwhile, Sam Crousen had gone his own way.

"When we used to lay out in our blankets and count the stars, Sam would talk about a ranch of his own just like Tracy and me, but after we found the gold Sam changed. He spent that winter drinkin' and gambling and when the snow left he started building a saloon in town. The ruins of that building are still standing. It ain't much of a place now, but in those days it was the most famous hell-hole in miles. A gaudy place—but hard underneath. And that's the way Sam Crousen become—gaudy and hard underneath.

"Not that I cared much. What Sam did was his own business. But Tracy, he looked at things different. Tracy had left the section to set hisself up on a piece of land he'd had his eye on for a long time. When he come to visit me and heard about Sam he got hisself sort of worked-up. It seems Tracy had knowed an older brother of Sam's down in Texas and he'd promised this other Crousen that he'd keep an eye on Sam and see that the boy didn't go wild in Montana. It bothered Tracy to learn that Sam was going to the devil fast, and all on account of having too much gold.

"So Tracy ups and rides for Gateway and I tailed along—something told me that trouble was in the wind. We found Sam in his office at the saloon—drunk and quarrelsome. When Tracy spoke his piece, Sam told us both to get out. 'Sam,' says Tracy real quiet-like, 'if I knowed what gold would do to you, I'd have dynamited the mountainside the day we found that vein—and it ain't too late yet if Jeff's agreeable.' That remark started hell poppin'. The idea of losing all that gold brought all the devil out of Sam Crousen. Him and Tracy had some hot words and the first thing I knew, a gun busted loose and Tracy was dead—in my arms."

CORRIGAN'S voice dropped low and his eyes became sad and far away as though he were seeing that long-gone day. "They sent Sam to Deer Lodge—for life. With him and Tracy gone I was sole owner of Showdown, as we called the mine. I had a mine full of gold—and my best friend was dead because of it!

"If I could make you realize how I cottoned to Tracy Varney you could maybe understand why I made myself a promise at his funeral that I'd never touch an ounce of gold from Showdown so long as I lived. And I never have. They's been good seasons and lean seasons, but the Bar Z Bar has always managed to pull itself through. I'd put Showdown out of my mind, forgotten that it existed—until tonight."

"When the Legion came," Helen prompted in hushed voice.

"When the Legion came. I was a-sit-

tin' waiting for you when three of 'em walked through the door. They had on black masks, but I'm pretty certain that the one who did the talkin' was Black Jack Taggart. They admitted they was looking for the trail to Showdown, said they'd been terrorizin' the spread to ruin me so's I'd have to go after some gold. Seems like they knew the whole story about the mine."

Jim listened raptly. The whole thing was beginning to take pattern and make sense. Helen and her foreman had stayed in Gateway waiting for the storm to end. The Legion had discovered that the girl was still in town after the stage had departed and their frameup scheme had been started. With many witnesses to testify that the girl had been in Gateway at the time of the holdup it would have been useless to try and plant the night's robbery on her. Foiled in their plan, the Legion leaders must have decided to force a showdown with Corrigan that very night.

"They gave me twenty-four hours to think it over," Corrigan continued. "They hinted that something might happen to you, Helen, if I didn't give in. After they left I started worrying because you hadn't come home. Maybe I should have roused the boys, started them looking for you, but I went alone. That's why I was gone when you got here.

"I remember seeing some horsemen through the drizzle. Then lead knocked me off my horse. I managed to get into the saddle afterwards, come home. I remember making it to the living room."

He smiled wearily. "For over twenty years I've let lost Showdown stay lost. Leave it that way, Helen-girl. But if you ever do need gold bad enough, there's a little red book that'll help you find it."

"The book . . ." he continued and paused abruptly. For a moment his body seemed to stiffen and then he relaxed easily, his eyes meeting Bert Harris's. "Take care of my little girl, Bert," he said clearly. The gaze switched to Jim. "I'm saying you're not the man that got me, stranger." His eyes caressed his daughter. "The cowboy's all right, girl. Take it from your old dad." He stiffened again, convulsively. "This one . . . had my name . . . on it," he jerked out.

Jeff Corrigan had ridden on to greener range. His passing had come so quickly that it left the three stunned. Jim, his mind still busy with the fascinating tale of the past he had just heard, was the first to break the trance-like spell. His care-free face was a stiffened mask when he spoke.

"Seems like I've gotten myself mixed up in this Whispering Legion business whether I've wanted to or not," he said evenly. "I'm going to be in the game to the finish. Neither of you have any reason to trust me a heap. But I want you to know that I'm in the saddle against the Legion from now on. Whether I fight beside you, or alone, is up to you!"

CHAPTER V

Stacked Cards

JEFF CORRIGAN was buried next morning; his resting place a little fenced enclosure sheltered by clustering cottonwoods near the ranch house, a flower-bordered plot with a mound where his wife had long waited. Sunny Jim was there with Bert Harris and Helen and the half-dozen hands of the Bar Z Bar who had ridden from their fruitless quest in the dark hours before dawn to learn that death had found their lost boss.

Jim had gone to the bunk house after the old man's passing. Neither Helen nor the foreman had attempted to stop him as he left the house, for the girl had been overwhelmed by her grief and Harris had paid him no heed. With sunrise Jim had changed his wet garments for clothing donated by the ranch's crew and he wore somber raiment when he joined the group at the open grave.

The service was brief. Harris read a passage from the Scriptures and the girl intoned a short prayer. The waddies of the Bar Z Bar lowered the tarpaulin-shrouded form of their prod. Watching the girl, Jim saw that she remained dry-eyed through the ceremony, although her face showed the ravages of sorrow. He knew she was remembering her promise to her father. Bert Harris

led her back to the house before the riders reached for shovels to finish their task.

His face serious, Jim lingered near the graves for awhile. Many thoughts thronged his mind, some dealing with the past, others involving his immediate future. He intended to go to Gateway this very morning, make a report to Buzz Pritchett about the stage holdup. Before he left the ranch, though, he meant to have an understanding with the girl-owner.

Marching back to the ranch-house, he knocked and was admitted by Harris. The foreman, grimly silent, ushered him to Helen, who sat in the living room—the same room where Jim had found Jeff Corrigan.

For once Jim groped for words. As he looked at the girl, bravely defiant in her grief, he wanted to tell her a lot of things—and he wanted her to believe them. Instead, he twisted the brim of his sombrero between restless fingers and choked. "Miss," he finally blurted, "I can realize that this ain't the time to be botherin' you, but I got a piece to speak. What I said last night was gospel. I'm wondering if you'd let me ride for the Bar Z Bar."

She lifted apathetic eyes, stared through him. "Prince," she said slowly, "maybe I've been wrong about you. But if you aren't on the wrong side of the fence, I can't understand why you want to get mixed in a fight that isn't yours. Also, I'm wondering how long you'd last when powder starts to burn—and it's going to burn in the Gunsight. A pretty shirt is no weapon in a fight against the Legion."

Jim winced, then a grin crept across his face. "A pretty shirt makes a man look plumb peaceable," he conceded. "That's just why I usually wear 'em. When a man looks like he couldn't rassle a yearling, nobody wants to fight with him. It's the dangerous-looking jaspers that are always having to prove they're dangerous. I've always wanted to be a dove o' peace, so I dressed for the part. Right now I'm hankerin' to shed my wings and grow some claws."

She had to smile. "I could use a man," she admitted. "Half of our crew has deserted or been bought off since the Legion started to ride. I might give you a try. What do you think, Bert?"

Harris puckered his brows before replying. "Reckon it would be all right, Miss," he decided. "Your dad took to him at first sight. That's a good recommendation."

Jim turned toward the door. "Seeing as how I'm hired, I'll be asking for the day off. I've got business with the sheriff in town."

He paused, one hand on the jamb, his face serious again. "Miss Corrigan," he said, "I'm hoping I'll be able to prove that I'm on the square . . . Soon."

WITHOUT waiting, he stepped through the door and moved noiselessly down the steps. He was half way to the horse corral when Bert Harris hailed him from the porch. "Just a minute," the foreman called.

Jim waited, prickled by curiosity. If the man had something to say, he was willing to listen. There were things about Bert Harris that he couldn't fathom and one of them was the way he had steadied Helen the night before. Jim had a desire to know Bert Harris better.

"What are you going to see the sheriff about?" Harris asked bluntly as he swung alongside.

"Why?" Jim inquired with equal bluntness.

The foreman halted abruptly. "I just put in a good word for you with Miss Corrigan," he pointed out. "I figgered you'd taw the mark and I think you'll be valuable. You're not as soft as you pretend. Just the same, I was showin' more faith than you're maybe entitled to. I happen to be foreman of this spread and I got a right to know what you're up to."

"You're not so sure that I didn't shoot Jeff Corrigan."

Harris wagged his head. "I know you didn't," was the surprising reply. "I'll lay my cards on the table, cowboy, and I'll expect you to do likewise. When I went alone last night to look for the old man I found the spot where he'd been dry-gulched. They was tracks of two hosses and since you didn't have a mount, it follows that you weren't around. Also, the job was done with a rifle. I found the ejected shell. Two of the three who come to the house must have waited along the trail. Maybe some day I'll meet up with

them hombres because I've got a way of knowing one of them when I do!"

"Mind telling me?" Jim asked.

Harris stooped, began to trace a pattern in the damp earth. Beneath his finger a horses' hoofprint took shape, a print with a peculiar marking not unlike a diamond in the center.

"The rain had messed things up," the foreman explained, "but I saw enough to know that the man who fired had a hoss whose right hind hoof left a mark like that."

Jim studied the mark until Harris erased it with the heel of his hand. "That'll be worth remembering," the cowboy ruminated. "What I can't figger is why they shot the old man. Corrigan had the key to this Showdown mine they are after. Looks like they spoiled their chance of ever getting the location."

"I've been a-thinkin' about that, too," Harris admitted. "I reckon they didn't intend to kill him. They probably figgered he was aimin' on seeing the sheriff when he headed for town. They might have meant to just warn him or wound him."

Harris paused expectantly and Jim knew that the foreman was waiting for his own story. The cowboy had no reason to keep silent. He had not mentioned his experiences before because something in his nature rebelled against telling Helen Corrigan that he had been attempting to champion her. It would have sounded as though he were trying to save his own face by pretending to side in a battle that wasn't his concern.

So Jim began to talk. He told of his arrival in the Gunsight country and his meeting with Taggart at the Tivoli. He gave details of the conversation he had overheard, the plot of the three that had sent him up the mountain with the stage. Then he recounted the battle in the storm and the subsequent events that had brought him to the ranch to find Corrigan wounded and alone.

". . . And that's what I aim to see Pritchett about," he concluded. "If you'll loan me a horse, I'll be going."

"Your story is mighty wild but it's probably true," Harris conceded. "It sort of lines up with our opinion of Black Jack Taggart and his crew. We're giving you a chance, anyway, but this is fair warning, cowboy. I'll be watching till you prove yourself. One move that don't look right and you'll wish you'd never saw the Gunsight!"

"Fair enough," Jim said without rancor, and then he happened to glance over the foreman's shoulder and across the valley's floor to the south. Horsemen made a darker blotch against the shadowy foothills. "Company's coming," he announced.

Harris turned and eyed the knot of riders in silence for a long time. "If I see what I figger I see," he finally announced, "you won't have to go to Gateway. Buzz Pritchett's leadin' that crew."

It wasn't very long before Jim knew that the foreman was right. When the riders loomed closer he saw the stoop-shouldered form of the sheriff well to the front, the floppy black sombrero pulled low against the morning sun. At least twenty men rode at his hells and, as the distance shortened, Jim began to recognize others. Black Jack Taggart was in the group, immaculate in his dudish clothes. And close behind him, the stringy body of Chew-Tobacco Chaney bobbed in a saddle.

SOMETHING was up. Jim was certain of it, and he didn't have to wait long to discover what. The horsemen, reaching the ranch, moved directly toward the two in the yard. Bert Harris took a step forward, opened his mouth to speak but a voice cut him short.

"That's him! That's him!" Chew-Tobacco shrieked and aimed a skeleton finger at Jim. "That's the sneakin' buzzard who robbed me last night. He's changed his clothes but I know him. Took the pay-roll away from me, that's what he did!"

"Shut up, Chaney," Pritchett ordered tonelessly, then spoke to Harris. "Bert," he said, "me and this here posse is after Prince. He rode up the mountain last night with the stage, pulled a gun and took the pay-roll away from Chew-Tobacco. He skedaddled down the mountainside and we've been looking the valley over for him. 'Pears we've found him, too."

"There's one man riding with you that's had orders to keep off this spread," Harris snapped. "I'm meanin' Black

Jack Taggart!''

Taggart smiled and his tight-fitting coat moved with his shrug. ''I'm a lawman today,'' he said easily. ''Happened to be in town when Buzz was deputizing a posse to track down this thief. I go where the posse goes.''

''Now don't get yoreself het up, Bert,'' Pritchett put in soothingly. ''These here personal annymos-it-ies can wait. What we want is that Prince jasper.''

''I'm talking, Pritchett,'' Harris exploded savagely. ''Jeff Corrigan was bushwhacked last night. Prince found him in the house, wounded bad. Before he cashed in his chips, he told us that three of the Whispering Legion had called on him and then cut him down on the trail when he headed for town, looking for his girl. Jeff was plumb certain that one of them snakes was Black Jack.''

''I got a word to say, too,'' Jim drawled. With quick sentences, he sketched his account of the robbery, telling of Taggart's plot and the fight on the mountain. The eyes of the Boxed Z man stabbed him angrily when he had finished.

''Looks like this stranger is cooking up a yarn to clear himself,'' he snorted. ''And Harris seems to want to help him along.''

Hate saturated his words and Jim knew that he had made an implacable enemy. Whether Taggart had witnessed his escape down the mountainside or whether the Boxed Z man had been in the valley on other murderous business didn't matter. It was clear that the man knew Jim had taken a hand in the game and it was equally clear that Taggart had marked him as a foe.

The accusations and counter-accusations plainly had Pritchett in a quandary. He slid back his sombrero, scratched a shiny expanse of baldness. ''Did yuh say this Prince Jasper was the one who found old Jeff after the shootin' last night?'' he asked.

''I did,'' Harris replied. ''But I'm still accusin' Taggart of the job.''

Pritchett thought it over. ''I'm sheriff of this here county, not the judge,'' he announced. ''If yuh've got a charge agin Black Jack with enough evidence to substantiate it, yuh can swear out a warrant, Bert. But that ain't changin' my plans.''

''Meanin' what?''

''Meanin' that Chaney swears this critter held him up last night,'' the sheriff said. ''Seeing as how Chew-Tobacco is an old-timer hereabouts while Prince is a stranger to me, I'm inclined to believe Chaney. What yuh're telling' me about Jeff puts a new angle on the business. I'm arrestin' Jim Prince and taking him back to Gateway. The charge is robbery and suspicion of murder!''

CHAPTER VI

The King of Gunsight

GATEWAY, sodden in the sun, looked as cheerless by daylight as it had by night. After the beauty of Gunsight Valley, the town looked doubly drab to Jim as he moved down the main street surrounded by the posse. The ride from the ranch had given him his first opportunity to really see the country and the gently rolling rangeland shadowed by the sloping foothills with their background of majestic peaks had made a lasting impression. Enthralled by this magnificence, he had almost forgotten that he was a prisoner, the victim of a malign plot. He could understand why Jeff Corrigan had been content to forget the trail to Showdown. The Gunsight country was a treasure in itself.

Gateway proved to be bigger than he had thought, a combination mining center and cow-town. Pritchett headed directly for the jail, a wooden building as old as the town itself, squatting at the end of the street. A narrow corridor split the structure and this hallway was flanked by cells. The two fronting the building had been converted into an office for the sheriff and a lounging room for his deputies. Jim's guns had been removed at the Bar Z Bar. Now he was searched thoroughly and questioned. Pritchett was interested in the whereabouts of the pay-roll money, but to all of his queries Jim returned a smiling silence. At last he was escorted to a cell in the rear.

''I reckon congratulations are in order,'' Jim reflected aloud as Pritchett turned the key. ''This has been your

ambition ever since we met."

"Son, yuh can get them ideas out of yore head, pronto," the lawman retorted. "The Gunsight's been needin' a delousin' for some time. I'm a-doin' that chore in the only way I know how. I got nothing personal agin yuh. Yuh'll have a chance to defend yoreself before the judge and in the meantime I'll be ridin' herd on a few things, includin' Bert's ideas about Black Jack Taggart. 'Tain't likely that means much, though, seein' how the Boxed Z and the Corrigan spread have been on the peck for a spell and are apt to be throwin' things at each other. Just the same, I ain't playin' sides."

Left alone, Jim examined his cell with more than curiosity. With the cards stacked against him, he had no intention of waiting trial if he could make an escape, but the appearance of the place gave him little hope. The walls were sturdy, the window and door heavily barred. The only furniture was a cot and a chair, made so they could not be taken apart easily. He had nothing to work with and nowhere to begin.

The jail was very quiet and Jim suspected he was the only prisoner. He wondered what Helen had thought when she heard of his arrest. With all the odds against him he had surrendered quickly at the ranch and left with the posse at once. The whole affair had transpired so quickly that the girl had not put in an appearance until they were galloping away. But Bert Harris would tell her the news.

He was still musing an hour or two later when steps echoed down the corridor and a man peered through the bars of the door. Jim recognized him as a deputy-sheriff, one who seemed to occupy the position of jail-guard since he had not ridden with the posse. Jim had disliked the man on sight. He was about Jim's own build but stoop-shouldered and squinty-eyed, a colorless fellow who wore a multi-hued jacket as though to camouflage the drabness of his own personality. The deputy had none of the honest, open-handed attitude that characterized Buzz Pritchett.

"So you're the jasper that's got everybody in town talking," he sneered. "You don't look like you got guts enough to hold up a stage."

"Whisper that into the judge's ear, friend," Jim suggested lightly. "It might win the case for me."

"Ain't no call to get smart," the other growled. "I come to let you know you got visitors. It's against the rules when a man's locked up on suspicion of murder, but I reckon it ain't for Jake Shevlin to argue, seein' as how the King of Gunsight wants to talk to you." He raised his voice. "Down here," he called.

His announcement snapped Jim to instant alertness. The King of Gunsight! The man Chew-Tobacco Chaney had described the night before as he had lulled Jim into a false sense of security with his prattle about the Legion. A cane tapped along the corridor, echoing and re-echoing. Shevlin faded into the shadows and Quent Quayle shambled into view.

A Chinaman guided the blind-man and Jim knew at once that it was Sing, the man who Chaney had called the eyes and mouth of Quayle. Curiously enough, it was the Oriental who gripped Jim's attention first. He had seen Chinese in plenty in Helena and Butte and Havre, and they had all appeared to be older or younger counterparts of Wang Ki who had cooked for the Bent J for a quarter of a century. All Chinamen had looked a great deal alike to Sunny Jim but Sing was decidedly different.

SING was small but he looked wiry and dependable. It was his face that impressed Jim. The yellow skin, slitted eyes and narrow nose were characteristically Chinese but his features were ageless, inscrutable. He might have been as young as the day or as old as the land of his fathers. When Sing spoke the surprise was complete. Jim was used to the singsong of Wang Ki, a combination of tortured English, undecipherable jargon and mangled range idioms.

"My master desires to speak with you," Sing announced. His tone was monotonous but the words were clear-cut and distinct.

Jim tore his gaze from Sing, looked at Quent Quayle—and started. Chaney had called the man hideous but the actuality surpassed description. The King of Gunsight was a big man and well-built though he stooped as he walked and

dragged one leg in a peculiar shuffle. A neutral-colored thatch, unkempt beneath a worn sombrero, topped a face in which wrinkled eyelids sagged over sightless sockets. His mouth was a twisted gash that revealed broken teeth. The nose was crumpled, a grotesque thing smeared against his face. The effect of the whole was skin-prickling, revolting. The man was a monstrosity, a thing of evil.

The presence of the two presented a riddle. Jim had been told that Quayle rarely left his office. When the first reaction to the man's appearance passed, he wondered why Quayle had come. He found out quickly.

"I'm here to offer you freedom," Quayle said, his voice rasping. "I want information in exchange."

"I didn't know you had the keys to this calaboose," Jim said with forced levity, "but I'm willing to listen."

"The sheriff sent word that you refused to tell where you had hidden the pay-roll that you stole," Quayle went on. "Where is it?"

"The cards are being dealt from the bottom in this game," Jim told him. "If I've got any spare ace a-tall, it's that payroll. I'll be keeping that hole-card till my chips run short. Want to deal another hand?"

The retort angered Quayle. His face showed it and his voice was brittle when he spoke again.

"This Whispering Legion of yours is double-crossing you," he snapped. "I happen to have a spy or two of my own and they hear things—sometimes. You'll know what I'm talking about before tomorrow. Right now, I'm offering you a chance to come over to my side; tell me what you can about your Legion. I'm the man you robbed and what I have to say about your staying in jail will count heavy. Talk right and you'll be free by tonight. I'll see that you get out of the Gunsight alive and safe. I'm aiming to smash the Legion and I'm willing to pay for help."

"I sorta reckoned the Legion was a cactus in your paw," Jim replied. "If I could help you pluck it out, I'd jump at the chance. I told Buzz Pritchett all about what happened last night and I'm supposin' he passed the yarn along to you. I'm stuck with that story. If you want any real information about the Legion you'll have to ask that plug-eatin' driver of yours. Chaney seemed to be a charter member. You're trying to get water out of a dry well."

One of Quayle's hands tightened on his walking stick. The other pressed his servant's arm. "Is he lying, Sing?" he asked.

The Chinaman's slanting eyes bored into Jim for a long moment. "This one is hard to read," Sing reported. "Words fall from his tongue like dew, but hidden waters rush unseen beneath. He is playing a game of his own."

"A lone wolf, eh?" Quayle grated. "Got anything else to say, Prince?"

"Not unless I make it up as I go along."

"Stop stalling, man. You must know something. The Legion has got you marked for death. Why?"

"If the Legion is peeved at me," Jim retorted, "it's because they know I'm after their scalp. If you can add two and two you'll be able to figger that they're afraid I'm going to convince Pritchett that I've told a straight story."

Quayle tapped his cane against the floor in an angry tattoo. "You're a fool," he muttered. "If you change your mind and want to talk about the Legion, send me word . . . if you're still alive."

HE turned and the Chinaman reached for his elbow, guided him up the corridor. Jim heard the front door close behind them. He seated himself to think the matter over, for there was plenty of food for thought in this meeting with the King of Gunsight. Quayle was the one power in the section big enough to battle the Legion. He would make a splendid ally in the fight against the sinister organization but the man was cynical and hard and, more, convinced that Jim belonged to the Legion. It would take some tangible evidence of sincerity to enlist his aid, and Jim had none to offer.

Quayle's last remark gave him some alarm. He knew the Legion had every reason to hate and fear him. It was only his own word against Chaney's that kept him in jail and the slightest bit of evidence could easily reverse the situation. He brushed his feelings aside with the thought that so long as he was Pritchett's

prisoner he was safe from outside enemies. He was soon to learn how mistaken he was.

The afternoon wore away. From the cell's window he watched the purple shadows slide down Sentinal peak to enshroud the town, saw the gray of dusk give way to darkness. He ate the supper that was brought to him and went again to the window. He turned from it only when hurried footsteps crashed along the corridor and Jake Shevlin peered through the door. The guard was plainly excited.

"Pritchett sent word to move you to a different cell," he jerked.

Jim stretched lazily. "That's right nice of Buzz," he commented. "This one ain't so comfortable."

"Neither is the one you're going to," the guard snapped, "but it's strong and it ain't got no windows. They's a crowd down at the Tivoli talking about lynching you. They grabbed the sheriff but he managed to get the word along to me. They're headin' this way now!"

"To lynch me!" Jim roared. "For robbing a stage?"

"It ain't that," Shevlin gibbered. "Some was saying this afternoon that it looked like you salivated old Jeff Corrigan. The jasper was well-liked in this town."

"This afternoon! Who started this lynch talk?"

Shevlin hesitated for a moment. "Some of the boys from the Boxed Z," he blurted. "That spread is right next to the Bar Z Bar and it 'pears some of Taggart's rannies figger it's a personal matter since Corrigan was their neighbor —even if they scrapped with him when he was alive."

Stacked cards again. Now Jim knew what Quayle had been hinting. The Whispering Legion, ironically enough, had framed a lynching to avenge the man they had obviously murdered. They were going to seal Jim's mouth for good!

CHAPTER VII

Horsemen in the Night

THERE was little time to reflect on the irony of the situation. Shevlin had said that the lynch mob was already heading for the jail and even as the guard's key grated in the lock, Jim heard the thunder of advancing boots, the throaty rumble of many men. Pritchett's order to move the prisoner had not come any too soon.

With the dark drapery of dusk, the jail corridor had faded to a shadowy tunnel for only one overhanging lamp lighted the hallway. Hinges creaked and Jim stepped from the murk of his cell into this semi-gloom. He had an impulse to appeal to Shevlin for a gun that he might have a fighting chance but something about the guard's attitude warned him that he wouldn't be granted any such favor.

So instead, Jim drove his fist upward as the two men stood in the hallway, the bunched knuckles aimed for the guard's jaw. But Shevlin saw the blow coming. He made a frantic effort to move aside, one hand falling toward the gun at his hip. Jim's fist grazed the guard's shoulder, sent the man lurching in a half turn. Hands darting like snakes, Jim grasped the bottom of Shevlin's many-hued jacket, jerked the garment over the man's head. With the same motion, Jim tripped him and as the guard crashed to the floor, the cowboy snatched the weapon that Shevlin hadn't been able to reach. When the guard picked himself up it was to stare into the barrel of his own weapon.

"You'll be obliging me," Jim smiled, "if you'll unbar that front door, pronto."

But even as he spoke Jim realized that too many precious seconds had been wasted. Fists began to thump loudly against the door and voices, muffled, came through the thick panels.

"Open up!" someone roared. "We're gonna take that sneakin' bushwhacker out and string him up!"

Shevlin leered, with triumph it seemed to Jim. "Your little trick ain't gonna get you any place," the guard said derisively. "They's only one way out

of this jail—and that's through the front door."

Jim hesitated, his eyes cloudy. Shevlin was obviously speaking the truth and his statement meant that Jim had gained no advantage. It spelled nothing to be free inside the jail while the mob waited at the only exit from the building. Possession of a gun might delay his inevitable finish after the mob broke in, but otherwise his predicament was unchanged.

Spurred by some nebulous notion, Jim prodded Shevlin ahead into the sheriff's office flanking the door. The room was dark; the chairs and desk that furnished it had changed to menacing shadow shapes. Jim's own guns and belt lay across the desk. The cowboy quickly appropriated these, strapped the belt about his waist.

The clamor from without was growing louder. Guns barked spasmodically and a strident voice shouted above the noise. "Better open up, Shevlin," it advised. "Don't make us tear the damn place to pieces."

Jim was thinking fast, a scheme forming. He knew that the jail was sturdy but it couldn't stand a concentrated onslaught. And when the door was forced, the game was up. He turned to Shevlin.

"Listen to me," he said, "and listen close. You're gonna open that front door, savvy, and try to talk them hombres into leaving, which they won't. Toss 'em the keys and back into the office again. And keep remembering that I'll have a gun on your back just in case you forget yourself and say the wrong thing."

He planned a desperate gamble and could only hope that luck would favor him. From the shadowy depth of Pritchett's office he watched as Shevlin, cursing softly, stepped into the corridor and unbarred the front door. By standing at a certain angle, Jim could keep a gun trained on the guard's back and yet remain masked by the darkness.

SHEVLIN flung open the door, began to speak his piece, but the mob didn't wait to listen. At least twenty men had come to storm the jail. With boots clattering, spurs jingling, they swept into the corridor; a hate-crazed wave that carried the guard before them. When a half-dozen shoving, cursing men cluttered the narrow way with more crowding their heels, Jim stepped boldly to the doorway of the sheriff's office.

"Give 'em hell, boys!" he shouted and, raising his gun, fired. The lamp suspended in the corridor shattered explosively.

Pandemonium reigned in the sudden darkness. Men thrashed wildly about in stunned bewilderment, unable to distinguish friend from foe in that pitch-shrouded jumble. While those outside the building were struggling to push their way in, the men in the hallway were trying just as desperately to reach the door. Unnoticed, Jim wormed his way through the tangle and reached the street.

This phase of his scheme had worked easier than he had dared hope but his escape was not yet complete. A rising moon perched bird-like on the crest of a mountain to the east, spraying the town with a day-like luminosity, varnishing the tense, strained faces of the mobsters. With sombrero tugged low, Jim shouldered his way through them. He recognized no one but wondered how many were members of the Legion, how many were townfolks aroused by the lies of the masked riders.

Jim headed down the street, marching away from the lynchers with careless strides although he was gripped with a desire to run. His apparent unconcern served as a cloak of protection for no one challenged him. His objective was the livery stable where he had left his horse the previous night. It wouldn't be many minutes before the mob discovered his ruse and when pursuit started he wanted the fleet Tumblebug beneath him.

The grimy boy was there when Jim strode into the stable and the youngster's quizzical face widened with a grin as recognition flared in his eyes.

"So yuh got away from them necktie artists," the boy said. "I heard 'em tramp by here, shouting for your blood."

Jim grinned. "I'm free so far, younker," he admitted, "unless you're aimin' to raise a holler."

"Not me," the boy retorted emphatically. "Any jasper that could put one over on Chew-Tobacco Chaney is my pardner. That juice-squirtin' pole-cat stables his hosses here and he tries to warm my britches every time he pokes his face inside. When I grow up I aim

to salivate that gent. I'll be saddlin' your hoss."

Jim grinned again. It was heart-warming to find a friend in this hostile town and even though he knew the lad had picked him for a hero to worship, at least that worship was sincere. Together, man and boy tossed gear on Tumblebug with lightning speed. When Jim swung into the saddle, he looked down at the boy.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Bub," the boy replied . . . Bub Little."

Jim waved his sombrero in salute. "So long, Bub," he said. "When trouble quits being my saddlemate, I'll be lookin' you up, pard."

But trouble was waiting as he moved out into the street again. The mob realized it had been duped and a score of angry men were moving down the street from the jail. Someone spied Jim, shouted: "There he is now!" Angry voices echoed the exclamation.

Guns popped, orange flame streaking the night, stabbing dangerously close. Jim touched spurs to Tumblebug, thundered down the street. Behind, men were dashing for horses, hurtling to saddles. Without a backward glance, Jim raced through the town. He had marked the country well when they had brought him from the Bar Z Bar and he turned his horse's head toward the pass that led into Gunsight Valley.

Tumblebug had spent a night and a day in the livery stable and the little mount wanted to go. With five minutes start, Jim was certain he could outdistance all pursuit before he reached the pass.

Sage and bunch grass dotted the prairie that spread to the foothills and the climbing moon turned this vegetation to weird shadows. The night breeze slapped Sunny Jim's face as the miles slid behind and soon the walls of the pass loomed close on either side. Just before a turn of the trail shut off the view of the flats, he shot a glance over his shoulder. The lights of Gateway twinkled far behind. Between the town and the pass a group of horsemen were a racing splotch of darkness. They were behind —too far behind to waste lead in gunshot but they were clinging relentlessly to his trail.

HE turned to face ahead—and checked an ejaculation. At this point the pass was wide, a lesser valley leading into the inner valley. It stretched arrow-straight for half a mile but another group of horsemen blocked it.

He was trapped between the two parties. If those ahead attempted to stop him, he might be able to break through but the delay would give the pursuit time to overtake him. But would they stop him? Had the mob anticipated the possibility of an escape, placed a guard at the pass? Or were these riders from some ranch in the valley, heading to town?

Jim didn't know. He loosened his guns in their holsters, rode straight ahead. One thing was certain, he decided. He wouldn't be taken as easily as he had been at the Bar Z Bar. He was grimly determined to show real fight, but a voice cutting through the darkness reassured him. "Jim?" it queried—and told him that Helen Corrigan led those riders from the valley.

"It's shore me, miss," he admitted and, pulling short, doffed his sombrero. The girl's oval face gleamed in the moonlight—welcome sight—and he could make out the other riders now. Bert Harris, easily identified by his bandage, rode beside the girl and the whole force of the Bar Z Bar crowded the pair's back.

"I won't be exaggeratin' none," Jim supplemented, "when I say I'm mighty glad to see you."

"Are you all right, Jim?" the girl demanded jerkily and he thrilled at the note of concern in her voice. "I sent one of the boys into town after they'd arrested you. He reported there was talk of lynching you tonight. We came as fast as we could."

"That was mighty nice," Jim said lightly. "It's been a long time since anybody worried about me."

"You're working for the Bar Z Bar, now," Helen retorted icily. "The spread protects its own and it doesn't stomach lynchings. Are riders on your trail?"

"That," Jim reflected to himself ruefully, "should put this cowpoke in his right place." Aloud he reported: "About twenty saddle-burnin' hombres followed me out of town. They'll be along shortly."

As he spoke, the drumming of hoofs

reached them. Helen jerked her horse, faced the men. "Ride back into the valley," she ordered tersely. "Once inside, we'll spread out, head different directions. These riders from Gateway will have nine of us to trail instead of one. When the chase plays out we'll meet at the ranch."

Obediently, her men wheeled, headed along the back-trail and Jim rode with them. Once again he had to admire this strange girl who proved herself capable of playing a man's part. She had grasped the situation and, like a seasoned gun-boss, formed a plan and put it into action without a wasted second.

Beneath the thundering hoofs, the pass soon gave way to the table-level floor of the valley and the group spread out fanwise, each choosing a different route. Jim's trail skirted the foothills of the mountains walling the eastern side of the valley.

Apparently the ruse had worked, for no pursuit put in an appearance on his trail. He had not covered many miles before a thought occurred to him: Why ride aimlessly, waiting for the hue and cry of pursuit to die down? He had had very little sleep the previous night. It would be just as safe—or safer—to seek cover and enjoy a rest as to gallop along unfamiliar trails till dawn.

Whether the pursuing riders had divided their forces when they found the many trails of the Bar Z Bar he could not know. Satisfied that no one was in the immediate vicinity at least, he turned Tumblebug loose in a cluster of aspens on a gentle slope, sought a resting place for himself in a spot ringed by chokecherry bushes.

IT seemed that he had hardly spread the saddle blanket and stretched himself upon it for slumber before he was wide awake again. Gazing directly overhead, he saw the moon riding high, knew that time had passed. For a moment he lay motionless, ears strained to detect whatever sound had disturbed him. Somewhere close by, spurs jingled musically and Jim hugged the ground. The unmistakable voice of Black Jack Taggart reached his ears.

"I tell you, Sabin," the man was saying, "somebody's going to pay for that buckaroo crashing the jail tonight."

"Aw shucks, Jack," Kurt Sabin chuckled. "You want to have your cake and swallow it at the same time. This is going to be our lucky night. What if that hombre got away? With every man from Gateway a-chasin' him, we've got the chance we've been waiting for. And when folks find out what's happened in town tonight, they'll be plenty to remember that you and me was out o' town, hunting Prince. Pretty smooth for us."

"That part's fine," Taggart admitted, his tone surly. "Lucky I managed to pass out the orders before we saddled up to go on this chase, but just the same, I'd feel better if somebody put a slug into this Prince galoot. He's tangled in my hair a little too much."

Sabin laughed. "Forget it, Jack," he advised. "When we started expanding the original Legion, we promised a lot of jaspers some easy dinero. So far the pickings has been a payroll or two and a few head of cattle we've run off on the Corrigans. In a few days we'll have real money to put spirit in the men. Then you can order every one of 'em to go gunning for this Prince with a little bounty stake on the side. We can afford it after we've had old Quayle at the hideout long enough to sweat the dinero out of him."

"Yeah? Maybe we'll have every man on the old hellion's payroll out looking for our scalps," Taggart put in pessimistically.

"Not a chance!" Sabin scoffed. "The boys got orders to get rid of the Chink after they grabbed Quayle, didn't they? Whose gonna sick Quayle's men on our trail if we've got the boss, hisself, and the Chink ain't in the picture?"

Taggart made a reply but Jim didn't wait to hear it. He had drunk in every word and was already fading up the slope, his tread as silent as death's. He had heard enough—enough to know the Legion was striking at Quent Quayle this very night!

The masked riders had been quick to grasp an opportunity, but now opportunity lay in Jim's grasp, too. He was going to ride back to Gateway, circumvent their plot by some means. And why not? The thought spread a grin across his face. The last place the citizenry would expect to find him would be in the town itself. Here was a golden chance to offer the King concrete evidence of his own

stand against the Legion. If he were successful, by tomorrow he might have the aid of Quayle's power in the fight against the lawless.

He thought of these things as he watched the two toss cigarettes aside, lope across the valley. Then Jim searched for his horse, found the mount not far away. In a matter of minutes he had started for town.

Getting to Gateway was surprisingly easy. Apparently the pursuit party had divided at the pass in order to scour the valley effectively, for he reached the defile without sighting another human. Luck continued to ride with him along the backtrail.

He pushed the horse relentlessly for he had no means of knowing whether the Legion had already struck at Quayle and success must hinge on his reaching town before they did. Kidnapping for ransom seemed to be the basic idea and such a feat would not require much time to consummate with conditions favoring the Legion as they did this night.

Slowing to a walk as he neared the town, Jim saw that Gateway lay ominously quiet, a dark huddle of buildings splashed indiscriminately with the broad brush of moonlight. Tumblebug pranced down the street. Jim's eyes were alert for a sign he had noticed before, a weatherbeaten board marking the office of Quent Quayle. He found it easily and at the same time sighted two saddled horses who waited patiently in front of the building. At the moment his eyes lighted upon them, two men raced from the doorway beneath Quayle's sign, flung themselves to the backs of the mounts. In a flurry of moon-misted dust, they galloped up the street to be swallowed by the shadows.

THE entire action had only taken a moment but the scene had lasted long enough for Jim to recognize one factor that sent his pulses racing. Both men had worn hood-like masks, the insignia of the Legion.

Something about their haste shouted that he had come too late. This pair had done the Legion's work, were making a getaway. The thought was enough to goad Jim into tossing caution to the winds. Swinging from the saddle, he dashed through the doorway beneath the sign.

The lower front of the building was devoted to a hardware store and a mercantile establishment. The door split the two, led to a steep stairway, and he realized that Quayle's office must be above. Propelled by some nameless fear, he mounted the steps, three at a time, and hurled himself into a room at the top.

The place was empty but he discerned an open door leading to still another room. Jim stepped through the doorway —and stopped abruptly.

This was Quent Quayle's own office, but the King of Gunsight was not in it. The scanty furniture of the room was overturned, crashed into kindling. The Legion had preceded him, taken Quayle and fled, while the two men he had seen had stayed to take care of still another matter.

Quayle's office had never been completely finished. The place had no ceiling and gaunt rafters stretched overhead like skeleton fingers. The moonlight, spilling through the only window, etched the scene clearly—and revealed something else, the something that had frozen him to the floor.

Hanging by the neck from a rope tossed over one of the rafters was the form of Sing. The Chinaman's hands were trussed behind. His unbound feet jerked spasmodically in the grim dance of death.

CHAPTER VIII

When the Beacon Burned

RELEASED from the trance inspired by this new evidence of Legion ruthlessness, Jim bounded across the room. Grasping the dying Chinaman about the middle, he lifted him so the noose was slackened. As long as he held Sing in this manner, the Chinaman was in no further danger of strangling but Jim needed a knife to cut the rope and his own was gone, removed when he had been searched at the jail.

He gazed about the room desperately, his eyes searching for a cutting implement. He saw Quayle's shotgun where it had been tossed into a corner, but nothing remotely resembling a knife was

visible in the wreckage.

Shifting for a better view, Jim rubbed a shoulder against a voluminous pocket in the blouse Sing wore. The feel of a hard object hinted at a hidden weapon. Holding the Chinaman with one arm, Jim probed the pocket and his questing fingers closed on a long wicked-looking knife. In a moment he had cut Sing down and carried him to a spot beside the window.

Sing was unconscious, his tongue protruding from a face ghastly gray. Jim righted the table that had served as a desk, rummaged through its drawers. He sought whiskey to use as medicine to revive the Chinaman but there was none to be found. Instead, his fingers, exploring among a jumble of papers that filled the drawer, felt the smooth, hard surface of a photograph buried deep among them.

It was reasonable to expect that a man of many interests would have papers, even if that man were blind. But of what possible use could a picture be to Quent Quayle? Jim drew the photo from the desk and, moving into the moonlight, found it was an old tintype. He studied the picture intently. It was of a man, dressed in range grab, stiffly self-conscious before the photographer. The man was young, scarcely more than a boy, and something about his features was vaguely familiar. It was as though Jim had never seen the man as he was pictured here, but, rather, was reminded of someone who might have looked like this man at one time. Certainly the picture was not of Quent Quayle. Granting that the King's features had been malformed by accident, there were still subtle differences between the two.

He turned the picture over, hoping to find some clue to the subject's identity. Written in a scrawling fist was the Spanish maxim: "El oro y la muerta van juntos."

Jim whistled softly. "Gold and death go together," he translated with some difficulty. "I guess that's shore enough true."

Shrugging the matter aside, he tossed the picture back into the drawer and moved to a cupboard that hugged one wall. It was the only fixture of the room that hadn't suffered from the raid of the Legion and he found a bottle of brandy on one of the shelves.

He forced the bottle between the Chinaman's lips and the fiery liquid had the desired results. Sing strangled, gasped, opened his eyes. Jim watched him quizzically.

"How do you feel?" he asked. "Reckon I ought to rustle a sawbones for you?"

Sing waved a hand weakly. "It is both unnecessary—and unwise," he choked at last. "Time will be—sufficient physician."

For several minutes he lay silently fighting to recover the breath that had been taken from him. Finally he spoke again.

"Masked men have carried away the master," he said slowly. "Had it not been for your timely arrival this unfortunate one would have returned to his ancestors. How may I reward you?"

"Forget it," Jim said brusquely. "All I want to do is convince you and your boss that I'm against the Legion."

"Still I must reward you," Sing went on in his monotonous voice. "And I shall do so by asking you to flee. Ride far from the Gunsight, priceless Prince. Death waits you here. Forget the Legion; forget this battle of evil and ride away—tonight."

Jim grinned. "Pears to me the fun's just starting. I aim to hang around."

SING, his face wooden, studied him. "You will stay," the Chinaman said as though to himself. "You will not be turned from your purpose. Perhaps I will repay you when you near the dragon throne for the day will come when you will need help desperately. Can a man outwit the wolves and best the jackal at the same time?"

"I guess you know what you're talking about," Jim said hesitantly. "Seems like you Chinese always talk in riddles. But I think I've roped the idea and I'll keep my eyes unbuttoned. And now I'll be going. The folks in this town took in the welcome mat on me—and morning's coming fast."

There was nothing else to be done for Sing. The Chinaman had been badly choked but he would recover himself completely with time. So, following his own suggestion, Jim stepped to the top of the stairs. As he began the descent,

he paused in the darkness, for he thought he heard the door creak below. Hastening downward, he moved to the street. Not many yards away a figure shuffled along the board walk. The nocturnal stroller seemed to be in no hurry but something affected about his slow amble whispered that the man was trying to cover an interest in the vicinity of Quayle's office.

Jim was sure the fellow had been in the hallway, had perhaps been attempting to discover what had happened in the rooms above. And with that suspicion to prompt him, he recognized the stringy shape of the man. It was Chew Tobacco Chaney.

It was Jim's intention to pick up the trail of the men who had carried off Quent Quayle. He still had hopes of aiding the King of the Gunsight but he knew that precious time had been lost. Sight of Chaney inspired a new idea. If he could force information from the traitor he might be able to save himself arduous hours of tracking. Chaney belonged to the Legion. Chaney might know where Quayle had been taken.

The stage driver was gradually moving farther away. Jim swung into the saddle, urged his horse to a walk after the man. He would have to accomplish his purpose quietly in this hostile town, he knew, and he debated as to the best proceedure as he rode along. The distance between himself and his quarry was slowly narrowing when Chaney cast a quick glance over his shoulder. Panic twisted the stage driver's weather-beaten face as he sighted Jim. With a squawk of terror, Chaney broke into a run, heading for the narrow space between two nearby buildings.

Anticipating discovery, Jim had unfastened his lariat and silent fingers had shaken out the noose. The rope whistled through the air, the loop settling about Chaney's neck just as the man gained the protection of the buildings. Drawing the line tight, Jim dismounted, moved hand over hand along the rope until he was able to grip the stage-driver.

"What're yuh gonna do to me?" Chaney asked, voice quavering.

"Shoot you if you don't shut your face," Jim retorted savagely. His eyes were darting about, seeking a place where he might take his prisoner for questioning. A huge, silent building loomed across the street, its boarded windows evidencing vacancy. It looked as though it would serve the purpose so, dragging Chaney along, Jim trudged toward it. The front door was sealed with a rusty padlock but when Jim threw his shoulder against the panels, the hasp snapped under the assault.

He forced Chaney inside, kicked the door shut behind them. Moonlight, trickling between the boards that barred the windows, revealed a vast, deserted room. A dust-shrouded bar ran the length of the place while tables and chairs cluttered the farther end. Plainly there had been a day when this ghostly interior had echoed to the clink of glasses, the shuffling of chips, the clinking of a roulette wheel, the roar of roistering men. It came to Jim that this must be the casino that Sam Crousen had built, the saloon where Jeff Corrigan's ex-partner had shot down Tracy Varney.

ONE episode in the drama of lost Showdown had been enacted here but Jim was not concerned with the past at the moment. He had brought Chaney to this place so that he might gain a key to future episodes in the same grim play and he was determined to make the man talk. He turned on Chaney with feigned fierceness, calculated to convince the stage-driver that he was in the hands of a desperate man.

"As long as I've got my lass-rope around your ornery windpipe, I might as well go on and hang you," Jim snarled. "The fact that you belong to the Legion is excuse enough—not to mention that your lying tongue almost had me dancing on air tonight."

Chaney's face went chalky, his little eyes wide with terror. "Don't string me up," he pleaded, his voice choking. "I didn't mean yuh no harm, cowboy. Honest tuh Pete, I didn't. I had tuh carry out my orders. They'd have killed me if I didn't."

Jim's eyes snapped. "There's one kind of talk I'm willin' to listen to," he told his prisoner. "I'm plumb anxious to cut sign on the Legion. Tell me what you know about 'em and I'll maybe let you go. Otherwise you dangle, shore as shootin'."

His words shook the stage-driver. Jim

could see that. "Give me a chance," Chaney begged. "I can't talk about them. They'd kill me sure. Yuh don't know what it means tuh doublecross the Legion, cowboy."

"Now ain't that too bad?" Jim murmured, his voice sarcasm-edged. "They'd kill you sure, eh? Now listen to me, you tobacco-slobberin' sidewinder, if you don't talk it's a cinch I'll kill you. If you speak up, nobody's gonna know but you and me. You'll have a chance to get out of the Gunsight, if you want it. Take your choice—talk, or fight hemp!"

Chaney gulped, hesitated. "What do yuh want to know?" he asked.

"Plenty. First of all, who belongs to the Legion?"

"I don't know. Nobody does; not even us jaspers that belong."

Jim jerked on the rope. "Do you think I'll believe that kind of hog wash?"

"It's true," Chaney squealed. "We take orders from four masked hombres that boss the Legion. We do what we're told tuh do without back talk. If two or three gents have tuh work together they go masked. Nobody knows who else belongs. The jaspers that rod the gang say that's for our own protection. Since nobody knows who else belongs, nobody can turn traitor and name the rest. I can't even figger how it ever leaked out that they call themselves the Whispering Legion but the whole Gunsight country seems to know that. Most be the Legion *wanted* the name knowed."

Jim digested this information with mingled reactions. He was reasonably sure that terror was forcing truth from Chaney but the driver's story sounded fantastic. On the other hand, Jim could see logic in the Legion's method of insuring secrecy by shrouding the organization in mystery from within as well as from without.

"Taggart's a ring leader," Jim prompted. "Who else?"

"I dunno," Chaney replied and hurried to supplement his answer as Jim's eyes glinted angrily. "A couple of masked gents stopped me on my way up Sentinel about a year ago. One of 'em might have been Taggart. They asked me to join up and promised me some easy dinero if I did. Reckon I was sorta peeved at Quayle long about then so I called for a hand in the game. They told me all I had tuh do was wait for orders and keep my ears pinned back. I was skitish about the set-up, sorta afraid I was trusting 'em too much. When I spoke my piece, one of 'em laughed. 'Don't yuh worry about that, old son,' he says, 'we learned to keep our mouths buttoned at Deer Lodge.' Tying that to a few things I heard afterwards, I sorta figgered the leaders are ex-jailbirds. 'Pears they started a crew in the pen, calling themselves the Whispering Legion since they had to do their talkin' in whispers."

"And that's all they ever told you? Didn't they ever mention a lost mine they were looking for?"

"Shore they did. 'Pears as how some of the boys was grumblin' since the money didn't come in so fast. The bosses called a meeting and told us they was aimin' on gettin' hold of a hidden mine."

"Where was that meeting?" Jim demanded instantly.

"In a cave at the foot of Sentinel," Chaney told him and launched into a description of the place's location. "The big four said they'd burn a beacon fire on the mountain whenever they wanted us all to turn out. Reckon that'll only happen when something big is about tuh bust."

THERE was little more to be gotten from Chaney. Against Jim's thrusting questions he maintained that he did not know where Quayle had been taken. "My orders was to sort of keep an eye on Quayle's office after the boys packed off the boss," he insisted. "That's howcome yuh found me there."

Jim gnawed his lower lip in silent meditation, then slowly unfastened the noose about the stage-driver's neck. "I reckon you've been telling the truth," Jim said. "Part of it's kinda lumpy to swallow but I'm keeping my word and letting you go. I'm probably plumb foolish to free you since you'll lope straight to Taggart and tell him what I know."

Chaney shuddered. "Not me!" he declared emphatically. "Once I saw what happened to a hombre that crossed the Legion. I ain't anxious for a dose of the same medicine. I'll be keepin' my

lip buttoned and I'm askin' yuh to forget it was me that told yuh what I did. Otherwise I'll be leavin' the Gunsight —pronto."

"I don't figger I owe you anything a-tall, Chaney," Jim told him, "but I ain't hankerin' for your life. That's the little difference between me and the pack you run with. I won't betray you —but keep out of my way!"

He turned, leaving Chaney standing in the big room, moved toward the ravaged door. At the threshold he saw that the blackness of night had began to dissolve to the pink-streaked gray of dawn. Night, he realized with a start had sped away and morning crept to replace it. Then he stepped from the doorway into the half-light of the street and two sights met his eyes.

One was far up on the heights of Sentinel mountains. The peak loomed large behind the town, its lofty outlines etched against the dawn. Like an evil eye winking down on the scene below, a beacon fire flared balefully. The Legion was calling its members to meeting!

The second sight that claimed his attention was much closer. It was a group of horsemen blocking one end of the street. The mounts were approaching at a slow pace, the riders drooped and dejected in their saddles. They were men who had ridden far and hard through the night and Jim knew them instantly. The lynch mob who had pursued him so futilely had returned to Gateway.

One leap carried Jim to the doorway of the deserted saloon but he had waited too long. An amazed shout of recognition from one of the oncoming riders electrified the group into sudden vengeful action. Questing lead buzzed about the cowboy as he gained the dubious shelter of the doorway.

CHAPTER IX

The Vanishing Rider

THE few hours of sleep he had snatched among the foothills saved Jim. They gave him an advantage over these riders who had spent a strenuous night in the saddle searching for him. Had they been as alert as he, they would have cut him down before he reached cover but as it was, their actions were sluggish, their aim erratic, and Jim gained shelter unscathed. Once inside the saloon, he lunged for a lone chair that stood at the entrance end and, slamming the door, propped the chair under the knob.

Lead crashed through the panels, dangerously close to his head. Jim knew the door wouldn't hold many minutes if the men of Gateway rushed it, but he counted on gaining time to seek a vantage point inside the building.

A balcony overlooked the main floor, running the entire length and width of the building. The dim outlines of numerous doors leading off of the balcony told him there were rooms on the second floor. Shoulders were already battering against the front door so Jim dashed for the stairs, pausing just long enough to send one high shot of warning through the door. Then he thudded up the stairs, ran the length of the balcony and found a door that yielded to his touch at the rear of the building.

Just before he stepped into the room he saw the door below crash inward and men ooze through the opening. He also noticed that Chew-Tobacco Chaney had disappeared, apparently behind the bar. Jim smiled at the stage driver's strategy. Chaney was making himself safe from flying lead and at the same time insuring the fact that no one would realize he had been inside the building with the wanted man. Legion members would be in the crowd, unmasked hellions playing the part of ordinary townsmen fired by outraged justice. If future developments proved that Jim had received secret information, there would be no one to whisper that Chaney might have been the informer.

The upstairs windows had not been boarded and only a dust-coated pane barred Jim's way to freedom. The sash screamed its protest when he raised it and then he felt the chill of doom for he had placed himself in a trap.

It had been his thought to quit the building by way of the window, but the cold gray dawn-light showed that he could not descend the wall. The exterior of the building at the rear was finished with tight-fitting boards with no handholds of any sort. To drop from

the second story would not have been an extremely hazardous feat except that the alleyway was littered with old barrels, garbage and shapeless debris directly below. The least he could expect from such an attempt would be a broken limb.

All of the mob was inside the building now, and sounds from below indicated an extensive search was being conducted. Boots thudding on the stairs warned him that at least part of them had elected to explore the upper portions of the building.

For a moment he debated whether to stay where he was in the hope that the searchers might miss this particular room or whether to chance a mad dash through the crowd. Then he began to grin widely. He had forgotten an important factor under the stress of circumstances. When he had removed the lariat from Chaney's neck he had wrapped its sinuous length about his waist. A rope altered the situation.

The door was equipped with a sliding bolt on the inside and Jim manipulated it at once. Then, quickly looping the rope around the doornob, he tossed the coiled hemp through the window. Sliding over the sill, he began an easy descent to the ground.

The alleyway was almost beneath his feet when the rope slackened abruptly and he fell the remaining distance. That sudden drop meant that the door had been forced and, accordingly, Jim was ready when angry faces appeared at the window. Landing cat-like, he jerked his gun as his feet struck the ground. The weapon belched once and the heads disappeared instantly.

WHEN they popped into view again and lead snarled downward, Jim was turning the corner of the building, heading for the street. Dodging among the horses of the mob, he found Tumblebug, flung himself into the saddle. The men who hunted him had left their mounts ground-anchored in their haste to be into the building so, with an ear-splitting shout and wave of his sombrero, Jim stampeded the horses in every direction. Reins trailing, they churned a fitful maelstrom of dust. Jim touched steel to his own mount and thundered, once again, out of Gateway toward the pass to Gunsight Valley.

He was far out, drumming across the level open stretch, before pursuit appeared behind and when the pass was still dim in the distance, the few horsemen who had taken his trail had dropped from view. Apparently they had little stomach for the chase after their futile experience of the night before and were content to let the will-o'-the-wisp elude them for the time being, at least.

Jim met no human on the trail through the pass and across the valley. The beacon fire still burned on Sentinel like the eye of malevolent Cyclops. He smiled to himself as he watched it. Quizzing Chaney had at least given him the location of the Legion's meeting place. With the beacon signalizing a gathering, he had decided against taking Quent Quayle's trail.

"A meeting for the whole murderin' pack, tonight," he mused. "Tumblebug, reckon you and me will maybe attend that meeting."

The sun was still far from zenith when he reached the Bar Z Bar. Bathed in the glow of morning, the clustered buildings were a cheerful sight but the air of desertion that had cloaked the ranch on the night of his arrival still clung to it. The horse-corral was empty; the bunkhouse a dejected, lonely building, but when he approached the ranch house, Helen met him at the door.

Her blue eyes searched his face silently as he clicked his heels together, raised his hand in an elaborate salute. "Sunny Jim reportin', mam," he grinned. "I shore hate to admit it, but I feel plumb asleep back in the hills. Now it's 'way past my breakfast time."

That half-truth would serve, he had decided. Later he might tell her of his return to Gateway but already he was glad that he had held his tongue. The girl had troubles of her own. She smiled wanly as she led him toward the kitchen and Jim remembered that she must have put in a weary night, herself.

"I wonder," she said monotonously as she began to prepare the food, "just what would have to happen to make you really serious for five whole minutes."

"Something's wrong?"

"It's Bert," she told him. "He's missing. All the boys were back at the ranch by dawn—except Bert and you. He hasn't showed up yet. I've had the

crew looking for him all morning."

Jim whistled softly. As he ate he thought of Taggart and Sabin who had ridden apart from the others the previous night. He also re-pictured the scene in the ranch yard when Harris had denounced the boss of the Boxed Z before Pritchett and his posse. Had the foreman met two of his enemies somewhere among those dark foothills? The same fear was riding the girl.

"Heavens knows how many of the Legion were riding in the mob that trailed you last night," she said with her old fire creeping into her voice. "They've reason a-plenty to hate Bert. And I can't help but remember that we separated, were riding alone in order to save your fool neck!"

"You think a lot of Bert Harris, don't you?" Jim asked casually.

"Yes, I do," she retorted. "Next to my father, I never regarded any man so highly as Bert. And if he's come to harm because . . . because . . ."

Her thought went unfinished but Jim didn't need to hear the words to know her meaning. She was thinking that Harris might have been killed in an effort to protect him and it was obvious that she did not consider the cause worthy of the cost. She cared a lot for Harris, admitted the fact. Somehow that admission stabbed into Jim, into the real Jim behind the mask of flippancy he sometimes wore.

"I reckon I'll be riding," he told her. "Maybe one more man on Bert's trail might mean the finding of him."

SHE followed him to his mount in silence but he sensed that speech was quivering on her lips, things she wanted to say but did not know how to word. When he swung into the saddle, she spoke.

"Maybe I was a little rough on you, Jim," she said hesitantly. "Bert's being missing has got me worried but I realize it isn't anybody's fault in the true sense of the word. I'm sorry about my insinuation. You couldn't help what happened last night."

The familiar grin spread across his good-humored face. "I shore understand, Helen," he said very solemnly. "You wouldn't hurt my feelings for the world. You just say those things because you naturally hate the sight of me."

Fire flaming in her eyes warned him that an explosive outburst in keeping with that auburn hair was going to follow. He didn't wait for it. Swinging his horse, he galloped out of earshot and as he rode he chuckled softly. Why the devil did he have to arouse her antagonism every time she showed signs of unbending toward him? The chuckle died as he recalled his new mission.

Had death overtaken Bert Harris while darkness blanketed the valley? If it had, Taggart and his devilish Legion would answer for it, he decided. He liked Harris, liked the blunt honesty that seemed to be part of the man. Helen's admission of her care for the foreman only strengthened his determination to find the man or avenge his death, if dead he were.

The vicinity of the Bar Z Bar was apt to be dangerous before the day was through since both the law and the lawless would be seeking the man who had escaped jail, and they would expect to find his near the ranch that had championed him. So Jim worked toward the foothills again. He headed in the direction of the cave Chaney had mentioned, the cave where the Legion held its mass meetings. The stage driver had said the organization met only when something of importance called for a general gathering. Jim felt reasonably sure that the coming meeting was occasioned by the kidnapping of Quent Quayle. Possibly Harris, too, was a prisoner of the Legion.

One stone, then, might kill a number of birds, and the stone in Jim's sling was his knowledge of the location of the cave. If it were humanly possible, he intended to force an entrance to the meeting. It would be a risky venture, his chief protection being his belief that Chaney had said nothing to the leaders since to do so would seal the stage driver's own doom.

He covered many miles as the hours slipped away. Where the valley's floor gave away to the foothills, the going was slow. Buckbrush studded the promontories, stirrup-deep. Jim watched for the missing foreman but he quickly realized the futility of search. As he penetrated deeper he reached timber, cottonwoods at first, and, beyond, the deeper blue of evergreens as the hills became mountains. Such concealment could shroud an army.

Night was beginning to tumble down upon him when he neared his destination after scouring the foothills as effectively as possible. As the shadows deepened, he found himself at the foot of Sentinel, a point where the base of the mountain had ben sliced off, leaving a towering precipice that rose skyward. He picked his way cautiously for the foot of the cliff was studded with boulders, littered with debris.

He was making his way along a torturous trail when he suddenly checked his mount in astonishment. Another horseman wound between the huge rocks, several hundred yards ahead. The rider had his back to Jim but the cowboy knew him instantly. It was Bert Harris, the man he had sought all day. He was about to call to the foreman when he thought better of the act.

The hidden cave must be somewhere close and, perhaps, other riders were concealed by the tangle of rocks, horsemen who were coming to the meeting. To raise a shout might draw unwanted attention. Instead, he urged his mount forward, intent on overtaking Harris.

ANOTHER boulder blocked the way, a giant misshapen thing squatting in the trail. Jim edged around it, looked ahead and blinked his eyes. For a considerable distance the trail was clear of rocks. Harris should be somewhere ahead in that open space but the astonishing thing was that Harris had disappeared. Horse and rider seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Jim whistled through his teeth. Harris couldn't have gotten under cover in the short time since he had seen him. Yet the foreman was gone. Greatly puzzled, Jim moved forward, still skirting the base of the cliff. Before he had gone a hundred yards, he found a solution to the mystery of the vanishing rider.

A crevice split the face of the cliff. Scarcely wide enough to admit the passage of a mounted man, it was invisible from several angles, but it explained the disappearance of Harris. A sudden dread gripped Jim as it dawned upon him that this was the entrance to the cave Chaney had described.

Why had Harris turned into the crevice? Was the man following an instinct to explore or had he, too, come into possession of news of the Legion's meeting and was determined to attend? Another thought crept insidiously into Jim's mind but he shook it away angrily. Harris couldn't possibly be a member of the Legion, ramified though the organization was. He hated himself for entertaining the notion, even for a moment. Had he fallen in love with Helen, Jim wondered, and consequently wanted to suspect Harris just because she favored the man? Hadn't Harris tasted Legion lead on the very night that he had met him? Any explanation for the man's action was more feasible than to believe for an instant that Bert Harris was double-crossing Helen.

Jim stepped Tumblebug into the crevice. With twilight graying the valley, the inside of the rift was murky gloom. The passage widened as he proceeded and his eyes became accustomed to the darkness.

"That's jist about far enough," a voice grated and Jim stiffened in his saddle. Peering ahead, he made out a black-hooded figure who blocked the way. The man was unmounted and he held a rifle in steady hands.

"Yuh can reach for air, hombre!" the masked man snapped. "And unlimber yoreself from that cayuse—pronto!"

CHAPTER X

Lair of the Legion

IN the face of peril, Jim's first thought was to again wonder what had become of Bert Harris. If the foreman had not gone into the cervice, then where had he vanished? And if he had turned into the cliff's opening, how had he passed this armed sentry? Either question presented a riddle but there was no time now to attempt to solve the problem.

Instead, Jim was going to need all his faculties to take care of himself for the guard was approaching cautiously, repeating his command to dismount. With a resigned shrug, Jim began to slide from his saddle. As he groped for the ground, one booted heel came down upon a fist-sized rock for many strewed the passage. The rock was almost round and it offered

treacherous footing. It threw Jim off balance for a moment as he let his weight down. He lurched to recover himself and with the motion several things happened in lightning sequence.

In the semi-darkness, the sentry apparently interpreted Jim's move as a suddenly-launched attack. Possibly the man had heard of this cowboy who had outwitted the Legion ever since his arrival in the Gunsight, and was therefore expecting some trick. In any case, the black-hooded guard wasn't taking chances. His finger squeezed frantically at the trigger and Jim, seeing the motion, felt the cold breath of death. A miss was impossible at such a distance.

The hammer clicked futilely against the firing pin as he launched himself toward the sentry. The rifle had misfired! Jim was upon his enemy almost before he realized the fact. Grasping the barrel of the rifle before the sentry could jerk the trigger again or lever another shell into place, he shoved the man violently, sent him hurtling backward. The rocky wall of the crevice halted the sentry. The man's head struck the wall with an audible thud and the sentry was no longer a menace. With a low moan, the man slipped downward, unconscious.

Jim stood for a moment, breathing heavily. The peril that had passed had taken heavy toll of his nerves. Then the realization that he would be in awkward position if he were found here, straddling the prostrate form of the masked man, spurred him to action. He loaded the unconscious man across the saddle and quickly led Tumblebug out of the crevice and into the concealment of the nearest cluster of boulders.

His active mind was already formulating a plan that might now be put into effect. His first move was to unmask his prisoner but the bewhiskered face beneath was unfamiliar to him. He began to bind the sentry, using parts of the man's clothing for the task. The results were far from satisfactory but his rope had been left behind in town so he had to be content with the makeshift bonds. With the man tied and gagged, Jim donned the black hood.

Once again he moved toward the crevice, but this time he left Tumblebug concealed among the rocks. Striding boldly into the opening, he followed the tunnel-like way until it reached an end. He stifled a gasp of surprise as he stepped from the crevice, for it emptied into an open pocket a hundred yards in length and width and almost round in shape. Sheer walls rose on every side until they reached the canopy of sky stretched overhead. Lush grass carpeted this hidden spot and half a hundred saddle horses cropped contentedly in the enclosure.

The horses hinted of a large group of riders, but no humans were to be seen. Jim's eyes roved in search of the men who had ridden these mounts. About fifteen feet up the far wall was another crevice leading back into the depth of the mountain. A crude wooden ladder led from the floor of the pocket upward to this second hole. Chaney's description of the place had been sketchy, but Jim was certain that the splotch of darkness against the cliff's face marked the meeting place of the hooded band, the lair of the Legion.

THE grazing horses gave him a new idea. Moving among them, he began to examine right hind hoofs. He was searching for a diamond-shaped mark, the sign of Jeff Corrigan's murderer, according to Bert Harris. It was a foolish move, Jim reflected, in view of the suspicious circumstances that had surrounded Harris' own entry to this secret spot. If Harris were truly a traitor, it would be useless to follow any lead the man had ever dropped. But it was impossible to condemn Harris on such flimsy evidence. In his heart, Jim wanted to believe in the foreman and, in any event, he could see no harm in examining the horses.

He was forced to work cautiously. Many of the mounts were range cayuses who resented the approach of any but their masters. Because he could not chance a rumpus that might bring men swarming down the ladder, he was forced to overlook those horses. Twice new riders entered the pocket, dismounted and ascended the ladder. Both times Jim pretended to be concerned with a saddle girth and was ignored.

His quest fruitless, he climbed the ladder and ducked into the hole in the cliff's face. He could hear the rumble of voices for the hole was the mouth of a short tunnel that led to a large room, hewn by

nature from the solid rock of the mountain. In that cave waited the full strength of the Whispering Legion.

Behind his mask, Jim smiled grimly. "Talk about your spider and your fly," he told himself. "Here's this cowboy heading into a whole herd of spiders."

A few strides brought him beneath the vaulted ceiling of the cave. More than fifty men had preceded him. Benches improvised by placing planks across rocks were crowded with black-hooded figures. Jim made his entry easily, for he looked like the rest. The hood itself was apparently the only regalia of the Legion, for men wore their regular garments with only their faces masked. He was quick to note that those present had discarded any article which might serve to identify them. Fancy spurs that might have been the pride of a range rider were replaced by plainer steel. Flashy neckerchiefs that would have marked their wearers were substituted by drabber cloth. As he squeezed between two others on one of the benches, Jim was glad he had swapped his own many-hued garments for more conventional garb at the Bar Z Bar.

The cave was lighted by a lantern placed on a rough table at the far end of the interior and its glow seemed feeble in the vastness of the place. Behind the table sat four men. They too wore black hoods, but a tiny white star was sewed in the forehead of each. These, Jim presumed, were the big four of the Legion.

He looked about curiously. Here were men who personified evil. Bonded together by crime, motivated by greed, they represented a hydra-headed monster that must be crushed before peace would come to the Gunsight. This was the Whispering Legion, spawned in the shadowy corridors of the state penitentiary. These were the enemies he had chosen to fight.

He wondered if the sentry would be recalled before the actual meeting began, but he suspected that the man had been placed as a safeguard against unexpected intrusion and would be left at his post. Worry rode him momentarily as he recalled the two latecomers who had found the crevice unguarded. He dismissed his fears with the thought that since this was only the Legion's second mass meeting, a regular routine could hardly have been established. Consequently, the last arrivals would have no reason to suspect anything amiss.

His thoughts were interrupted by a movement of one of the four behind the table. A man arose, swept the assembled men with eyes that glittered from mask-holes and began to speak.

" 'Pears like just about everybody's here that's coming," he said. "Seeing as how it's past the time we set to hold meetings, we'll begin."

His voice was soft, drawling. But it did not fool Jim, nor did the affected idioms of speech delude him. He was positive the speaking man was Black Jack Taggart, but he had to admit that the boss of the Boxed Z was hiding his real personality cleverly.

"Gents," the leader continued, "yuh're all a-wonderin' why we burned the beacon last night tuh call yuh together. Some of yuh who had a little chore tuh do in Gateway may have a pretty good hunch. We got a little news for everybody tonight."

HE paused effectively. "Some of yuh gents has been beefin' because we haven't made a sizeable haul. Last night we bagged a catch that'll mean dinero for all of us. Before I tell yuh about it, we've got another piece of business tuh conduct that ain't so nice."

His hand moved in a quick gesture. Two of the white-starred men rose, slipped to one side and were swallowed by the shadows. Jim, watching every move, decided that other tunnels lead from the cave. Perhaps the base of the mountain was honeycombed with them.

The two returned quickly, a bound figure writhing between them. Jim's eyes widened as the lamp light threw the prisoner's face into relief, for the fellow was Jake Shevlin, deputy and jail-guard for Buzz Pritchett. The man's eyes, usually squinted, were wide with panic.

Shevlin was shoved into the open space between the table and the first packed bench. One of the white-starred men drew a knife, slashed the prisoner's bonds. When the ropes fell away, the masked man reached to his waistband, drew a six-gun and silently extended it to the deputy. Shevlin groped for it, his manner eloquent of terror and distrust of the whole procedure.

"Some of yuh has seen this kind of show before," the spokesman went on. "Those that ain't had better watch close. I reckon yuh all know Jake Shevlin, here. He failed in his duty to the Legion and we're givin' him a fair trial.

"They's a curly-wolf name o' Jim Prince rode intuh the Gunsight lately. He's soft-lookin', but his looks is plumb deceivin'. He cost us a mine payroll and he's been a general damn nuisance. We had it all fixed tuh string him up, but Shevlin here let him slip through his fingers, get out of jail. What yuh got tuh say for yourself, Jake?"

"I couldn't help it, chief," the deputy whimpered. "The man was a regular wild-cat. I was moving him out of his cell to make it easier for the mob after they busted in. Prince worked too fast for me. Honest to God, chief, it wasn't my fault."

The leader turned to his audience. "Yuh hear what he says, gents. The council of four contends that it ain't no excuse. Shevlin failed tuh do his job and he's got tuh pay the penalty. Anybody got any objections?"

Boots scraped nervously on the rocky floor. A bench creaked as a man arose. "Seems like Shevlin's luck was running the wrong way," the fellow growled. "Maybe he ought to have another chance."

"When we give chances, we take chances and we can't afford it," the leader snapped. "A hombre that fails the Legion puts a noose around the neck of every damn one of us. We gotta have men who can do as they're told. Anybody else got a piece tuh speak?"

Again restless feet whispered through the room, but no further voice of dissension was raised. The leader paused for a moment as if to wring drama from the situation, then his hand twitched in a gesture.

Apparently Shevlin knew what was coming. The deputy had seen this sort of trial before when another had been the victim. He dropped to his knees, groveling.

"Don't!" he screamed. "For Gawd's sake don't . . ."

Why the devil didn't the man use that gun they had given him, Jim wondered savagely? Why didn't he blast down that black-hooded monster? A weapon glinted in the hand of one of the four, a man whom Jim marked as being Kurt Sabin. The roar of the gun sent reverberating echoes rolling back into the bowels of the mountain. Jake Shevlin sprawled on the floor, his plea for mercy cut short by death.

Jim's fingers were clawing for his own gun when he realized that the farcical trial was over. He dropped his hand, remembering suddenly that he was in a room filled with enemies, that any overt act would seal his doom.

"The law of the Legion provides that a man on trial is entitled to a gun," the leader announced mockingly, and in that instant Jim knew definitely that Taggart was speaking, for the man had dropped his affected mannerisms. "Shevlin's gun wasn't loaded."

A BREATHLESS hush draped the masked assemblage. In Jim's brain Chaney's words were drumming: ". . . Once I saw what happened to a hombre who crossed the Legion . . ."

Anger left him trembling. The whole thing was so revoltingly senseless, so in keeping with this organization that thrived on ruthlessness. Shevlin's failure had been no greater than Chaney's and Jepson's when they had let him escape with the mine payroll. This murder had been no more than an object lesson to new recruits, with Shevlin as a human sacrifice to the devilish discipline that rodded the band.

At a command from Taggart, two men sprang forward, r e m o v e d Shevlin's body. Then a white-starred pair disappeared to return with another prisoner. A gasp rose from many throats as Quent Quayle was shoved into view.

The King of Gunsight twisted his face belligerently, his sightless sockets seeming to peer about with the potency of hypnotic eyes. He was a disheveled creature, his unkempt hair plastered against his forehead, his monstrous features fixed in hard lines of hate and anger.

"The King hisself," Taggart announced mockingly. "He's gonna stay with us for a spell until he's willin' to have the bank send out a sack of money for ransom. Reckon that'll please you boys."

"I'll see you all in hell," Quayle

barked in his rasping voice. "If anybody that's listening has got a lick of sense they'll tell my men where I'm being kept. The man who helps me will sit pretty for the rest of his life."

"The man who is thinking about a double-cross can remember Jake Shevlin," Taggart jerked out.

His eyes challenged the rank and file of the Legion and men stirred uneasily. Jim wondered if anyone present had the courage to contemplate treachery at that moment.

"I don't mind lettin' you jaspers know that we found a nice chunk of money in Quayle's office last night," Taggart went on. "They'll be a payday for everybody right now and a little bonus set aside for a job I want done. Yuh heard me speak of Jim Prince awhile back. Quite a few of yuh know the gent on sight. I'm offerin' five hundred dollars tuh the man who puts a forty-four slug intuh his carcass in the right place. He'll be hard tuh find but —"

"He ain't gonna be so hard to find," a voice echoed hollowly and at the sound every man craned to peer toward the tunnel leading to the cavern.

Framed in the entrance was an unmasked man and Jim tensed as he recognized that bewhiskered face. It was the sentry who had been on duty in the crevice, the man he had left bound and gagged.

"Prince jumped me tonight," the fellow screeched. "He took my mask, then tied me so's I couldn't interfere, but I got loose. The signs shore indicate that he's right here at this meeting—now!"

CHAPTER XI

Eyes for the Blind

THE lingering echo of the sentry's announcement was lost in the commotion of shuffling boots and overturned benches, for his words brought every man to his feet. Suspicious stare met suspicious stare from a hundred slitted eye-holes. And Jim, knowing any move that set him apart from the others would spell his doom, came to his feet with the rest.

Taggart was the first to realize that chaos would only serve to cloak the unknown enemy. His voice rose commandingly. "Sit down, men," he ordered. "If Prince is here, we'll get him! Millin' like a bunch of stampeded whitefaces ain't going to help."

Jim glanced at the man, was tempted to challenge him and shoot it out with the black-masked leader. If his trail had to end here this night, it would at least be some satisfaction to take the head of this hell-spawned crew with him.

But, eyeing Taggart, he saw something else, something the others, intent on watching their neighbors, did not see, something that gave him a glimmer of hope. Quent Quayle had been forgotten in the confusion. Sightless eyes probing to left and to right, he looked bewildered, helpless, but Jim wasn't fooled. The King of Gunsight was cautiously edging backward, his fingers groping for the table.

In an instant Jim sensed the man's purpose. Quayle, handicapped by his blindness, could only grasp a little of the situation. But Quayle had heard the sentry's words and knew that somewhere within the cavern was a man who might possibly be an ally. Helping Jim might be helping himself, and it looked as though the King of Gunsight was reasoning accordingly.

The blind man's groping fingers touched the lantern on the table and he flinched from the heat. The fingers crawled upward, fastened on the lantern's handle. Then, with a swinging motion, Quayle dashed the lantern on the rocky floor and as the light shattered explosively, blackness blotted the cavern.

The sudden darkness was a signal for complete panic. Men became jostling blurs, bumping into each other, stumbling over benches, cursing and striking in their confusion. It was the moment Jim needed, the moment he might have utilized to attempt an escape. But instead of trying for the tunnel's mouth, he moved forward.

It was not reason that guided him, but, rather, an instinctive urge to try and take Quent Quayle with him. He owed that allegiance to the blind man, now, and besides, the King of Gunsight—free —would be an ace-card against the Legion. Even with the advantage of dark-

ness, it would take luck to escape the cavern. Fatalistically, Jim intended to crowd that luck in a grim play to save the blind man, too.

Anticipating Quayle's move, he had marked the man's position before darkness came. Now he wedged his way between packed men, moving sideways until his shoulder touched the wall of the cavern. Skirting the wall, he advanced unmolested toward the table.

The Legion must have other lanterns somewhere in the cavern. At least one of the white-starred four would have the presence of mind to hurry for one. Already matches were biting spiteful pinpoints of light here and there. Soon a lantern's greater light might flood the entire cavern, so Jim tossed caution aside as he felt the rough edge of the table. Reaching in the darkness, his fingers closed on a man's arm.

"Quayle?" he hissed.

A match scratched, blossomed into flame nearby. A gust of air from a side tunnel instantly blotted it out but, in the second between light and darkness, Jim glimpsed the man he touched and knew that he had miscalculated his movements. It was not Quent Quayle he had grasped, but a white-starred masked man!

INSTANTLY Jim's fist lashed upward and this time he did not miscalculate. With the impact of fist against chin, he moved quickly, caught the other's sagging body. Jerking the man before him, he crooked an arm around the fellow's neck, thus holding the enemy tight against his own body. Then he used his free hand to jerk a gun from its holster, press it against the other's ribs. The Legion man had only been stunned by the blow. Even as Jim had maneuvered him into position, the other began to struggle, but now, as the steel prodded him, the masked man ceased his squirming.

"That's plumb correct," Jim breathed heavily. "Just stand real quiet-like and you'll keep on living—for awhile."

His action had been goaded by necessity, but now, with a white-starred man in his grasp, a plan was forming. It was a desperate plan, but the situation called for desperate measures.

He hadn't worked any too fast. Someone had found a lantern. Bobbing in the hand of another white-starred man, it sent grotesque shadows dancing through the cavern as men blinked in its glare. For a moment the rank and file of the Legion was as confused by the sudden light as they had been by the descending darkness. Then someone noticed a masked man being held by another, shouted hoarsely. Hands were flashing holsterward, filling, when Jim spoke.

"Reckon I can't watch all of you at once," he said loudly. "So somebody might stiffen after I'm salivated which suggestion ain't too gloomy, I'd sorta like to remind you that my trigger finger might stiffen after I'm salvitated which would mean a double funeral, considerin'."

The man he held sensed his meaning instantly, broke into quavering speech. "Don't shoot, for gawd's sake," he bawled. "He's got a gun right between my ribs!"

Jim knew that voice, and the identification sent a surge of triumph through him. Black Jack Taggart! He had the king-pin of them all.

The men of the Legion stood hesitantly, eyes on their leader, but gun arms began to sag slowly. Jim breathed easier. Not long ago he had felt the fires of wrath at the senseless killing of Jake Shevlin. Now he found time to be thankful that Taggart had used such an impressive method to teach his men discipline. Jim's own life was going to depend on the leader's hold over his hellions.

But in any event, he couldn't hope to hold the whip hand for long. It was his cue to use it at once, so he spoke, again, into Taggart's ear.

"I aim to leave—and I aim to take Quent Quayle with me," he said evenly. "Your skin's safe if your gunnies behave themselves. Play this thing square and I'll turn you loose at the end of the tunnel. What do you say?"

Taggart was able to control the terror that had tinged his voice when he had halted his men.

"You win," he said at last. "But I'm depending on you to turn me loose, like you said."

"I play square—even with snakes," Jim promised, and raised his voice. "One of you galoots lead Quayle to the end of the cave."

BOOTS scraped hesitantly till a white-starred man moved forward. He was the fourth man, the one who was neither Sabin nor Jepson. Taking the King of Gunsight by an arm, he propelled him between overturned benches and packed men until they reached the far tunnel that led to the ladder.

"Reckon that'll be far enough," Jim said. "Feel your way along, Quayle. They's a ladder leading to the floor of a walled pocket. You'll find horses there. Pile yourself onto one of 'em and give the cayuse its head. It'll take you through a tunnel. When you can't feel any walls, stop and wait for me. I'll give you a spell to make it. Then I'll be amblin' along, myself."

Quayle wagged his monstrous head in understanding, cast one vehement sightless glance behind him and disappeared. In silence the men of the Legion waited, and in silence Jim waited, too. The minutes dragged by on leaden feet. Then, when he guessed that Quayle had had ample time, Jim prodded Taggart and began to move toward the exit.

He knew that his progress was increasing his peril. Before, the Legion had been massed in front of him. Now they were to two sides, with some behind. Tempted by his exposed back, someone might chance a play. But the only man who moved was one of the white-starred quartet, a big man whom Jim presumed, rightly, was Bull Jepson. He planted himself before Taggart.

"Don't let him get away with this, boss," he snarled. "Let us fan that blind gent's tail before he has a chance to lope. Tell this hombre tuh go tuh hell—he's just bluffin' anyway. He knows he'd be dead in ten seconds if he killed yuh. Call him!"

Jim tensed. Once again his entire plan hung in the balance. His one card was his momentary power over Taggart, and Jepson had put his finger on the weak spot in his play. Much as he hated Taggart, Jim could never shoot the man down in cold blood. If Taggart chose to call him, his hold would be broken.

"It's my backbone that's liable to be parted if that gun goes off," Taggart announced. "I'm saying—let him go."

Jepson grunted his disappointment, stepped back. In slow measured pace, Jim and his prisoner lock-stepped until they reached the tunnel's mouth. Then, sending Taggart lurching forward with a violent shove, Jim turned, darted for the tunnel's end.

It was a fifteen foot drop to the floor of the little pocket, but Jim scorned the ladder. Leaping out, he plunged downward, and heard the thudding boots of Legion men before he struck the ground. With Taggart no longer menaced, the Legion men had leaped to action.

Orange slashes stabbed downward as Jim dived across the floor of the pocket and into the protection of the second tunnel. Heedless of the rocks that strewed the way, he pounded through the tunnel recklessly. It had been dark inside the pocket, but moonlight greeted him as he burst through the face of the cliff. Just tipping the eastern hills, a huge moon chalked the cliff, varnished the littering boulders and revealed Quent Quayle who waited astride a horse.

"It's me, Quayle!" Jim shouted and dashed to the spot where he had left Tumblebug. One motion took Jim into the saddle, another and he was beside Quayle, grasping the blind man's bridle. "Listen for my hoofbeats," Jim ordered, "and follow me, savvy?"

THE debris-littered base of the cliff slowed progress, so Jim headed into the foothills, intent on reaching the floor of the valley, where the best time could be made. They were going to need all the time to spare.

He wished, ruefully, that he had been able to stampede those horses that filled the little pocket inside the cliff. But that would have been impossible since the mounts would have had to be forced through the tunnel, one by one. Quent Quayle might have done the chore, for Quayle had not been menaced by Legion lead—but Quayle was blind.

That was the factor that was going to count against them, Jim reflected grimly. He had elected to play the part of eyes for a blind man. True, the King's action had resulted in escape from the cave, and that was a victory in itself, but now Quayle's handicap might easily mean the difference between escape and capture.

For the whole strength of the Whispering Legion would be on their trail in a matter of minutes.

CHAPTER XII

The Traitor's Brand

LIKE shadows banked upon shadows, the foothills were a dark blotch behind as Sunny Jim Prince and Quent Quayle fed steel to their mounts and pounded across the broad, moon-splashed sweep of Gunsight Valley. Overhead a single vagrant star winked down as though deriding them in their puny efforts to escape the doom that would be riding behind. The night breeze sobbed a soft requiem, for death was in the saddle.

But Jim, conscious of their handicap, and knowing that a race of horseflesh against horseflesh could have only one ending, was utilizing another factor—strategy. Before they had left the precipice he barked one question at Quent Quayle.

"Which way does your ranch lie from the pass?"

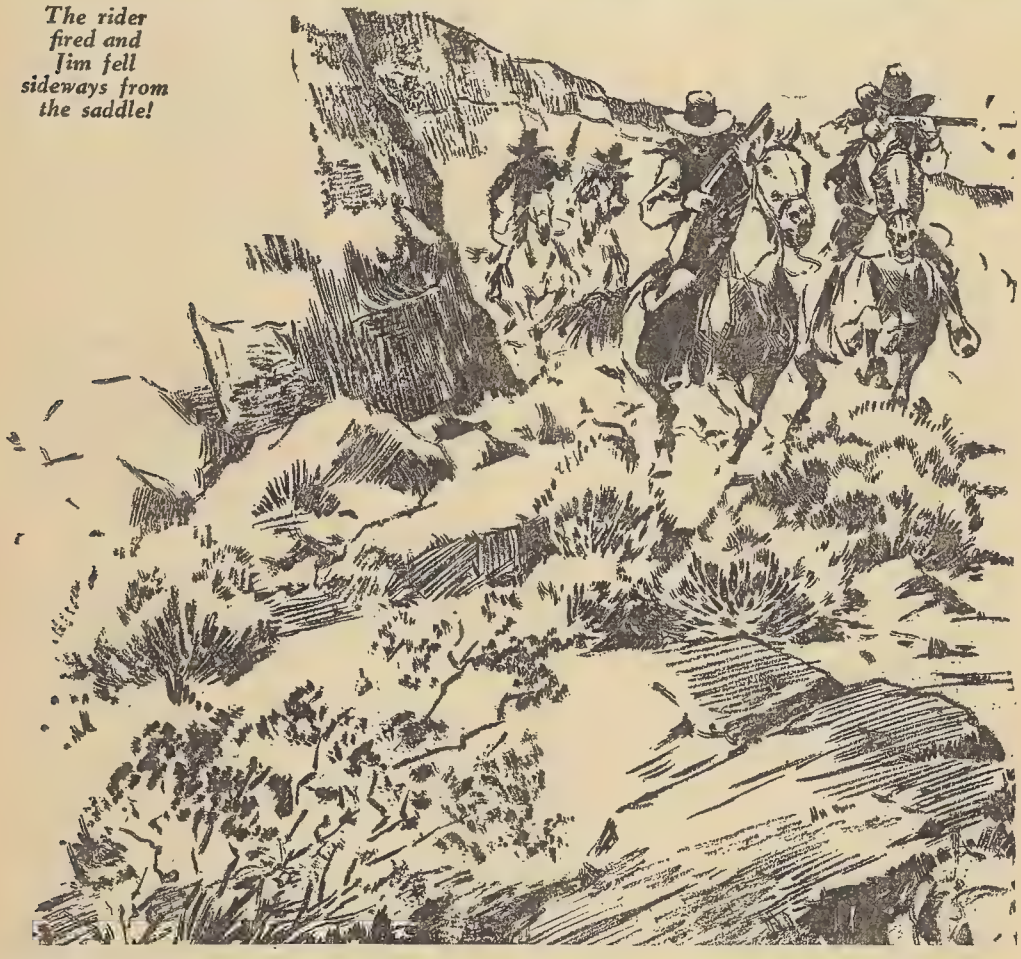
Quayle had told him. The King's spread was directly northwest of the valley end of Gunsight Pass. Calculating distances, Jim guessed that Quayle's ranch lay directly west of the Legion's lair, on the far side of the valley. Armed with this information, he had set a definite course.

Now, with the miles sliding behind, Quayle urged his horse forward, moved beside Jim. "Which way we heading?" the blind man wanted to know.

"North," Jim jerked.

"North!" Quayle repeated. "Are you loco? I was taken north through the pass and then east. If I figgered right, my spread is west of that cave and Gateway is southwest. Either of them's the place to head for."

"That's just what the Legion will figger," Jim shouted. "They'll figger on shutting us off at the pass and likewise



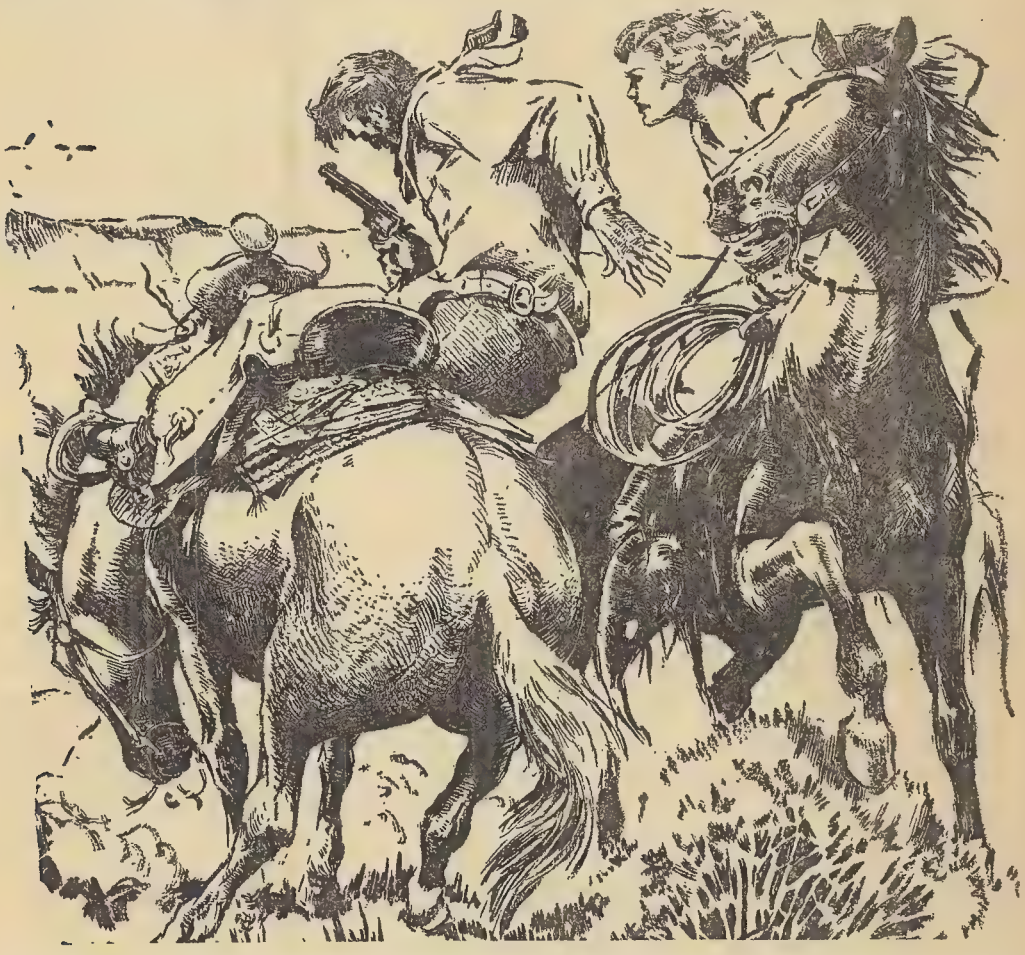
The rider fired and Jim fell sideways from the saddle!

they'll spread out enough men to keep us from reaching your spread. While they're latherin' their cayuses, we'll be heading in the one direction they won't figger on. Meantime, we can hole up someplace in the hills, wait 'll they get tired of watching for us."

Quayle grunted, but whether in approval or dissatisfaction, Jim did not know. The passing miles were proving his theory, for the dreaded pursuit did not put into appearance. But Jim was not lulled into any false sense of security. Taggart might have sent men to the south and to the west, but the Legion leader was too good a general to send his entire force in only two directions. Part of the riders would be headed north, after the escape points had been covered.

Veering toward the eastern wall of the valley again, Jim checked his mount at a spot his ready eyes had detected. The moon hung high now, a silver lantern that showered luminosity upon a clump of poplars effectively screening the entrance to a coulee cutting back between two foothills. Grasping Quayle's bridle, he led the blind man's mount through the trees and into the coulee. Brush studded slopes made the ravine a maze of writhing shadows. Somewhere ahead a hidden waterfalls tinkled plaintively.

"Reckon we'll hole up here for awhile," Jim announced and quickly described the place. "We ought to be safe here."



Quayle slipped awkwardly from his saddle. "We'd be safer," he rasped, "if you'd put a few slugs in the right galoots back at that cave. You must have had the best chance in the world before you got away. Why didn't you use it?"

Jim turned in surprise. It was their first real opportunity to talk since they had been thrown together, but neither Quayle's attitude nor his tone were

friendly. Jim hadn't expected congratulations for the rescue he had maneuvered, but he didn't feel that he deserted criticism either. His eyes narrowed as he replied.

"Sometimes," he said evenly, "a gent can crowd his luck so far he pushes it right over the edge of a cutbank. I figger I got all there was to get out of that show!"

SILENTLY he unsaddled both horses, spread saddle blankets and edged Quayle toward one of the makeshift beds. But long after the blind man's snores cut the night, Jim lay thinking—and his thoughts centered around Quent Quayle.

He had instinctively disliked Quayle at their first meeting, in Gateway's jail building. Now chance had made them partners in peril, but he realized their companionship was going to be strained. There was something arrogant about Quayle, and something ruthless. It hinted of the means by which a ragged wanderer had become King of Gunsight. And it hinted, too, that the man's very soul was as twisted and malformed as his face and body. Yet Quayle would make a powerful ally.

Such thoughts were with Jim as he fell asleep and they were with im when he awoke. Quayle still slumbered, so he explored the ravine. He found the hidden waterfalls, discovering a little creek that splashed down among the hills. They were sure of water in their sanctuary at any rate, and loaded berry bushes and signs of game promised food. Quayle was awake when he returned and Jim reported his findings.

The King of Gunsight had no comment to make. That day and in the days that followed, Jim learned that the man seldom talked. Theirs was a strange companionship for even the King's silence as he sat brooding before the smokeless fires which they sometimes dared, began to irk Jim. Quayle's twisted gash of a mouth was eloquent of animosity whether he spoke or not and when he did elect to speak it was to grumble at the food that fell to Jim's gun or to curse the inactivity that was their lot.

Remembering Sing and the events of that fateful night in Gateway, Jim spoke of it once. When he had finished, Quayle spat contemptuously.

"If the Chink had been awake, the Legion wouldn't have gotten me," he snapped. "The slant-eyed heathen deserved to have his neck stretched. If you think I'm thanking you for cutting him down, you're wrong."

Jim's fingernails dug into his palms, but he checked the hot words that were choking him. The man didn't even care about Sing, the one human who might be close to him. But Quayle was King of Gunsight and Jim hadn't forgotten that he needed the blind man's support for a plan he had formed. If curbing an impulse to tell Quayle what he thought of him would eventually mean the consummation of that plan, it was worth it. Accordingly, he tried to make his voice casual when he spoke.

" 'Pears you got me wrong," he drawled. "I didn't save Sing for anybody's thanks. I rode to Gateway that night to prove I wasn't in with the Legion. I'd tried to prove my stand at the jail, but you wouldn't listen to me."

"I trust no man till I'm sure of him," Quayle retorted. "When them hellhounds offered five hundred dollars for your carcass, I knew which side of the fence you was on. That's why I busted the lantern."

"And I'm thanking you for it," Jim said. "It sorta proved that two can do more than one. That's why I think a certain scheme of mine will wipe out the Legion, if you'll side me."

"Spill your piece," Quayle invited dubiously.

"The strength of the Legion is in organization," Jim began. "I'm figgerin' it'll take organization to beat 'em. Maybe your crew can do the job—but I doubt it."

"Every man on my payroll will be in the saddle when I get back to Gateway!" Quayle flared.

"And they'll be chasing shadows," Jim supplemented. "My idea is to get Buzz Pritchett to do a bit of snoopin'. Let him round up every rancher that he's reasonably sure of; start a vigilante party. He ought to be able to find enough honest men to equal the strength of your crew. Then we'll all pin our ears to the ground. Some night the Legion is going to ride in force—and we're going to hear about it. Then, with the vigilantes and your men working together, we'll be able

to stamp 'em into the ground."

"Pritchett's a fool," Quayle sneered. "I'll rod my own crew—in my own way. I aim to run down the Legion, but I don't need the law to help. *I'm* the law in the Gunsight."

Jim shrugged hopelessly, arose. There was no arguing with such a man. Night had again blanketed the valley and the whispering breeze stirred a strange restlessness in the cowboy. This was partly because of the inactivity of the past days, he knew, and partly because he was growing heartily sick of Quent Quayle.

"Reckon it won't hurt to think over what I've said," he told the blind man. "Meanwhile, I'm taking a ride. Aim to see what's doing in the valley and likewise pick up some grub."

THE King of Gunsight grunted and Jim tossed gear on his horse. Without a backward glance, he snaked through the poplars and out into the valley. Necessity had made him familiar with the country and he headed, almost instinctively, toward the Bar Z Bar.

Once again moonlight drenched the rolling rangeland and Tumblebug, restless as his master, ate the miles away easily. Jim, remembering that both Pritchett and the Legion might be looking for him, rode warily, but his fears were unfounded. He reached the buildings of the Corrigan spread unmolested, saw that darkness shrouded the looming structures with only a single light burning in the ranch house. It was in the living room window and, dismounting, Jim crept forward, peered inside.

Helen was curled in a chair, a book in her lap, but Jim saw she was staring into the fireplace, her eyes vacant. He had seen her in many moods. Now, noting the down-droop to the corners of her mouth, the apathy in her eyes, he fought an urge to step inside, take her in his arms. And, standing in the shadows, Sunny Jim Prince suddenly came to know that every action of his since he had come to the Gunsight had been for her. True, certain personal factors had been present in his battle against the Legion, but they really didn't count. He was fighting to remove a menace because that menace was aimed at Helen. It was a truth that could no longer be dodged.

He tapped lightly on the window and instantly regretted the action. It brought the girl to her feet, hand clawing for a gun that lay on the nearby table. Then she recognized him and replaced the weapon, but he had seen panic in her eyes for an instant.

She waited at the door till he stepped to the porch and he noticed the tired sag to her shoulders as she silently led him to the living room. The impulse to hold her close, comfort her, swept him again, but he fought it. Instead, he spoke to cover his thronging emotions.

"Reckon my paycheck ain't going to amount to shucks if I ain't on the job more often," he said easily. "Seems like I haven't spent an hour on the spread since I was hired.

"I suppose that it's best that you've been keeping under cover," she said and, suddenly, placed her hands on his shoulders. "Jim, I've been worried about you. Before you left the other day I wanted to tell you that Bert Harris told me about that stage robbery affair and why you made the ride. If I misjudged you once, Jim . . . I'm sorry. But this isn't your fight and I couldn't forgive myself if something happened to you. You musn't take chances like that."

He had wanted to see such concern mirrored in her blue eyes. It brought him the first faint hope that she, too, was considering him in the new light that had dazzled him this night. But he knew it was no time to speak of themselves. Everything in her attitude spoke of developments that had taken place in his absence. He asked about them.

"A hundred head of cattle were run off night before last," she told him. "And that's just the beginning, they say—the beginning of the end."

"The Legion!" he muttered. "You talked to some of them?"

"They tossed a note through the window," she said and, crossing to the fireplace, picked a piece of paper from the mantlepiece, extended it to him.

"I've been hiding out in the hills with Quent Quayle," he told her as he moved nearer to the lamp. "I need food to take back to him. I aim to convert that blind rannyhan to the right way of thinking if I have to saddle him and ride him to the finish. If he'll lend a hand, we can corral that girl-bullying band, pronto."

"Quent Quayle," she repeated. "One

of our boys was in Gateway, yesterday. He said Quayle had vanished and the Chinaman has had men combing the valley ever since.

Jim murmured, spread out the note. *"The raid tonight was a sample,"* he read. *"We aim to keep on till the last critter is gone from your spread. Calling in the law won't help. As soon as Pritchett turns his back, we'll be on the job. If you want to call quits, leave your father's Red Book on the corral gatepost. You know what we mean!"*

IT was signed: *"The Whispering Legion."* Jim placed the paper on the table, puckered his friendly face in puzzlement. The Red Book! Jeff Corrigan had spoken of one as he lay dying. "But if you ever do need gold bad enough, there's a little red book 'll help you find it," he had said.

Three people had heard him say it—Jim, Helen and Bert Harris, and those three only. Yet now the Legion knew of it, was out to get it.

"Is Harris back?" Jim asked and tried to make his question casual.

Her face lighted. "Why no," she replied. "But he's safe. I found a note from him, too, and I hardly know what to make of it. Of course I trust Bert . . ."

She crossed to the mantlepiece again, handed Jim a second piece of paper.

"Dear Miss," it read. *"Just to let you know I'm alive and safe. Haven't time to explain now, but I'll have to be away a few more days. Must ask you to trust me and wait. This is for the best."*

Harris' signature tagged it. Jim laid the note beside the other on the table, eyed them speculatively as he gnawed his under lip in silence. Both notes had been written in pencil, obviously by different hands. The Legion's warning had been scratched by a cramped fist, the other was written in a free, flowing hand. But there were similarities, too; little twists and letter-shapings that were the same.

Helen hadn't noticed those minute likenesses because the girl did not have ugly suspicion to sharpen her eyes. But Jim, remembering the foreman's disappearance into the lair of the Legion, could read something that wasn't in the messages. Bert Harris had written both notes, though he had made an effort to conceal his handwriting in one. And, irrevocably, by the fact, Bert Harris was stamped with the traitor's brand.

CHAPTER XIII

The Guns of Gateway

MORNING was already thrusting its rosy fingers above the ramparts of the Rockies when Jim headed for the hidden coulee where he had left Quent Quayle. Once again the range was deserted and Jim had only his own rioting thoughts for company, but these were silent saddlemates that harried him more than the law or the lawless ever had.

He and Helen had talked the night away, a visit pleasant in itself, for Jim hadn't told her of his suspicions about Bert Harris. Because he knew the girl trusted her foreman, and because he, himself, had once liked Bert Harris, he had been unable to find words to damn the man. And, besides, could he yet be positive that Harris was a traitor? Hadn't he once found Harris wounded on the trail, and hadn't Harris claimed that Legion lead had lain him there? And why had the man denounced Taggart on the day when Sheriff Pritchett had come to arrest Jim? Were those things part of a webwork of lies, woven by the foreman to keep suspicion from himself? Jim didn't know, but the matter troubled him greatly.

"That was the gent who was warning me to keep on the straight and narrow," he bitterly confided to Tumblebug. "Reckon I'll have a few things to talk over with him when we meet."

But he forgot all about Bert Harris when he threaded through the poplars that shrouded the hidden coulee. The dying moon cast feeble rays to light the scene, painted the familiar spot where he and Quayle had camped. And Quent Quayle was not there.

As suddenly as he realized that the blind man and his mount were no longer in the coulee, Jim instinctively dropped his hand to a holster. Had the Legion found the helpless Quayle? As his eyes

peered about in quest of lurking masked men who might be awaiting his own return, Jim cursed himself for leaving the blind man alone. The dawn breeze slithered through the bushes, the waterfalls sang its soft song. No other sound reached him.

Stalking carefully about, Jim satisfied himself that no one was near, but this investigation bore other fruit. A clearly marked trail led toward the valley, the trail of a horse and a burro. The horse would be Quayle's, of course. But the burro . . .? Jim slid back his sombrero, dug fingers into his corn-colored hair. Had some mountain prospector found the King of Gunsight?

Then he remembered Chew-Tobacco Chaney's description of the arrival of Sing and Quayle in Gateway years before. The Chinese had ridden a burro at the time. And Helen had said that Sing was having the valley combed for his missing master.

Pulling himself into the saddle, Jim turned back into the valley. It would be risky to be seen in the open with dawn seeping over the mountains, but he had to overtake Quayle before the blind man reached Gateway.

He had told Quayle that he wanted no thanks for any service he had rendered. But he had also asked the man to consider his plan for crushing the Legion. Now, spurred by thoughts of the latest raid on the Bar Z Bar, Jim was determined to get a promise of help from the King of Gunsight. He had that much coming from Quayle.

But when the morning sun burst above the eastern wall of the valley to splash a riot of color down those far slopes, Jim, for once, had no eye for that spectacle of beauty. He was dangerously near the pass and Quayle was still eluding him. Checking his mount, he reviewed his position.

Dared he enter Gateway if he failed to overtake Quayle in the few remaining miles? He had escaped the town's jail once by the sheerest chance. Could he risk falling into the hands of the law again? Buzz Pritchett was honest, Jim believed, but Pritchett's jail would make a splendid trap to hold him until the Legion found a way to blot him out. The chances were too great.

"Tumblebug, you and me is plumb unpopular," he gravely told the horse. "If we ain't dodgin' outlaw lead, we're fanning the breeze to keep a jump ahead of the law. It's a helluva life."

NO, he'd have to avoid Gateway. His only chance was to reach Quayle, either in the pass or in those miles of prairie land that lay between Sentinel peak and Gateway. Urging his mount, Jim moved into the defile, traversed its length and ventured into the open again. Ahead sprawled the dawn-washed town and Jim lifted his eyes in the hope that he might sight his elusive quarry. Instead, he saw a group of horsemen coming his way and riding at their head was the unmistakable, stoop-shouldered length of Sheriff Buzz Pritchett.

"Now talk about the devil," Jim muttered and wheeled his horse. With the motion, he heard a muffled shout from the group he had placed behind him. A bullet kicked dirt nearby.

They had recognized him! With the bullet as a spur, Jim scurried for the protection of the pass. Mentally, he cursed the luck that had kept him from reaching Quayle. Here was another chore the King could have done for him. Quayle had mentioned that he could free Jim from the law's charge. Maybe, convinced now that he was not a member of the Legion, the blind man might exert influence on his behalf. But Quayle must have reached Gateway just before the posse left.

Why was this large posse in the saddle so early? The answer followed the question in Jim's mind. Helen had told him that Sing was utilizing all of Quayle's men in a search for the lost boss. Probably the Chinaman had also appealed to Pritchett for help. The sheriff, not knowing that Quayle had returned to Gateway, was taking the trail in search of him. Now the sheriff had found new game.

It would never do to fall into their hands. Possibly a score of men rode behind Pritchett. The Legion, insidious as always, would have men of their own in that group, perhaps in the majority. Jim had a hunch that if he were captured now he would never live to see the inside of Gateway's jail. That goading bullet had been a sample of what he might expect.

So, feeding steel to his mount, he thundered out of the pass and into the valley again. Like an echo of doom, the hoofbeats of the posse thundered behind. This time Sunny Jim had no friends from the Bar Z Bar to tangle the trail for him. Grimly he skirted the foothills of Sentinel, but as he urged speed from the horse, he knew that defeat rode with him.

Tumblebug had been ridden most of the night, while the sheriff and his riders straddled fresh mounts. Before Jim was many miles into the valley, he knew the race could have only one outcome. Then, with the realization that capture was inevitable, he headed for the one spot which might provide sanctuary.

He had threaded through the timber fringe and the cliff hiding the entrance to the Legion's lair loomed ahead. The masked band had selected the spot because it was a natural hiding place, eluding the keenest eyes. Now it could be a hiding place for him if he wished to take the risk.

He had to gamble, of course, that the cave would be deserted. But surely Taggart and his men had immediately abandoned the place since two outsiders had escaped from it. With both Quayle and Jim aware of the location of their headquarters, the Legion's first step would be to move. There was a chance that they hadn't, but that chance was no greater than the one he would have to take if he fell into the hands of the posse. The very fact that Pritchett was on the trail proved the sheriff hadn't seen Quayle since the blind man's return. By the same reasoning, Pritchett couldn't have gotten the sketchy idea of the cave's location which the King would have been able to provide. If he could gain the tunnel's mouth, Jim figured, the law would ride on in futile search.

Then another thought struck him, tensing him in the saddle. Supposing Taggart, satisfied that Jim and Quayle were penned inside the valley, had continued to remain at the cave. The place, then, might easily be a death trap.

Jim cast a backward glance and a turn in the tortuous trail gave him a glimpse of the nearing pursuit. He'd have to chance it. Odds weighed against odds, the peril behind was more tangible than the peril that might be ahead.

THE boulder-strewn way forced him to slacken his speed. Picking along cautiously, he found the rift in the precipice, and, pausing for one last look, he saw that the boulders screened him from the oncoming riders. Edging inside the tunnel, he hesitated, ears strained. No sound reached him from within. Outside, hoofs drummed closer.

With a shrug, Jim moved farther into the tunnel and, mantled by the half-darkness, dismounted. Stealing back to the mouth of the opening, he peered outside. A triumphant grin spread across his pleasant face as he saw Pritchett, bending low over his cayuse's neck, leading the riders past at an angle. The posse was riding to make time and they were avoiding the boulders at the cliff's base. That haste was working to their quarry's advantage, for no one paused to rake the cliff with their eyes.

Safe for the moment, Jim debated his next move. Pritchett would soon learn that he had been fooled and would turn back. Probably, Jim reflected, he would be safer where he was than on the valley's floor. If the sheriff stumbled on the hidden rift, he could always retreat to the cave itself. The tunnels leading from the main cavern would provide hiding places for an army.

Turning, he followed the tunnel back into the little pocket—and stopped abruptly, anchored by what he saw. Half a dozen horses quietly cropped in the natural enclosure. The tunnel had blanketed what little sound the animals made. Jim shot a quick glance upward. The ledge was bare, the second tunnel a blot against the inner cliff's face. The riders of these mounts were nowhere to be seen.

Jim's first impulse was to hurry back into the tunnel, but as he eyed the little knot of horses, a temptation began to ride him. Dared he risk an examination of these mounts? Somewhere was a horse who wore the mark of Jeff Corrigan's murderer. He shot a second glance at the cavern's entrance and still there was no sign of life. Probably the riders of these horses were deep in the recesses of the big room.

It was a mad play, he knew, but, with a grin, he reflected that a man with his head in a lion's mouth runs little additional risk by inserting his neck and

shoulders as well. Slipping into the enclosure, he began to examine the horses, one by one. He was thankful they were good stock, not half-broken range cayuses who would viciously resent an approach. But once again his search was futile.

"Seein' how Bert Harris has showed up crooked, that was probably a bum steer he gave me anyway," he ruminated. "Just the same—"

"Now look who's turned horse thief!" a voice arrested him.

Jim spun, hand dropping to holster, but his arm froze in the motion. Crowding the little ledge above was Black Jack Taggart, unmasked. Behind the Legion leader stood Bull Jepson, Kurt Sabin and three others. Each had a gun trained on him.

"I've been waiting for a chance like this," Taggart went on. "I didn't think I'd get it so soon."

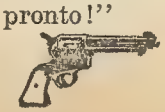
Death was staring down at Jim and he knew it. He could read his doom in Taggart's small, dark eyes and in the beady stare of Kurt Sabin and the belligerent look of Bull Jepson. To continue that move toward his gun would be suicide. It was going to take thinking to save himself, now—quick thinking.

"Buzz Pritchett was two jumps behind me when I headed in here," Jim said evenly. "If you let go with them irons, you'll be invitin' him inside. That wouldn't be so good for the Legion, would it?"

Taggart laughed. "The Legion," he sneered. "Who's going to say anything about the Legion? Me and the boys just happened to accidentally stumble on this spot when we was combing the timber for strays this morning. While we was looking it over, along comes a jasper that's wanted by the law in Gateway. Seems like the galoot had holed up here. When we tried to rope him, he went for his gun and we had to shoot. Pritchett will understand that we had no other choice."

"You think you can make that story stick?" Jim asked.

"Who's going to make us out liars?" Taggart asked in turn. "Dead men don't talk . . . And a dead man is what you're going to be, pronto!"



CHAPTER XIV

Taggart's Treachery

TAGGART'S words were equivalent to a death sentence. The Legion leader had a golden opportunity, for it was true that no one could question his story of the death of a wanted man—least of all Jim, himself. Taggart was going to use that opportunity to rid the Legion of its greatest enemy. With the gun aimed downward, the Box Z man's finger tensed on the trigger.

"You're plumb right about dead men not talking," Jim said loudly. "Reckon I'll never be tellin' anybody about a certain red book, now."

The wavering gun barrel told him that his words had struck home!

"What do you know about a red book?" Taggart demanded.

Jim shrugged with studied carelessness. "Seein' as how I'm gonna die, why should I be talking. The red book sorta drops a hint about the trail to Showdown mine. But maybe you knew that?"

"Of course I knew it," Taggart snapped. "What you interested in Showdown mine for, Prince?"

"Gold," Jim retorted. "You don't think I've been cavortin' around this Gunsight country for th' exercise, do you?"

His voice was easy, casual, his pleasant face bland; but inwardly he was tense as a leashed panther. Using words as chips, he was gambling for his life and he had chosen an appeal to Taggart's avarice. But at best he knew he could only stall for time. There were cards up his sleeve he had never played and he had no intention of playing them now. But a manipulation of truth might give him a slight reprieve.

"One of you boys get down into the tunnel and keep an eye skinned for that law-hawk," Taggart jerked, then turned to Jepson. "Keep Prince covered," he ordered and, with a man at his heels, the Boxed Z head descended the ladder to the floor of the pocket. When the second man had darted for the tunnel, Taggart cautiously approached Jim, plucked the cowboy's weapons and

tossed them aside.

"Now," he said, "do I savvy you're making a one-man play for Showdown—and you know something about the red book?"

"Shore," Jim lied easily. "I heard about Showdown and headed for the Gunsight. But I found the competition pretty stiff when I got here. Just the same, I think I've given you boys a lope for your dinero."

"He's lying, boss," Bull Jepson's heavy voice boomed from above. "He's sweet on the Corrigan gal—that's why he butted in. We got reasons tuh know that's the truth because . . ."

"Button your face, Bull," Taggart snarled, and faced Jim again. "So you're a lone wolf, eh? Tried to buck the Legion and grab Showdown for yourself? Is that what I'm supposed to believe?"

"That's the size of it. Reckon I'd have been smarter if I'd thrown in with you gents. Between us we might have had the mine by now."

Taggart's dark eyes were searching his face and Jim wondered what thoughts were racing behind the other's countenance. Taggart wasn't being completely fooled, he was sure of that. But it did look as though he had aroused the man's curiosity.

"Maybe it ain't too late to join the Legion," Taggart hinted, "providing you really know something that 'll make it worth our while to forget what a damn nuisance you've been. Mind naming your cards?"

"If I'm gonna die, why should I waste my breath," Jim countered. "Likewise, I figger I'm entitled to some information in exchange. If you want to match cards, I'm willing to talk."

TAGGART'S eyes gleamed; first with suspicion, then with cunning. Jim knew what the man was thinking. Taggart had nothing to lose by talking, for if he didn't choose to take him into the Legion afterwards, a bullet would quickly erase misplaced confidences. On the other hand, the Legion leader would have gained such information as he gave him.

"Don't let him bluff yuh," Jepson shouted. "We can make him talk."

Jim shot a glance upward, grinned. "You're a brainy gent, Bull," he applauded. "Maybe you could explain my carcass to Buzz Pritchett, but not if it showed signs of torture."

A thin smile creased Taggart's lips. "I'll ante, if that's what you want," he said. "Our part in this deal started years back when me and Bull and Kurt was resting a spell in Deer Lodge. We met a half-crazy galoot by name of Sam Crousen."

"I know about Crousen," Jim supplemented. "He was one of the three partners that found Showdown, but later he was jailed for killing Tracy Varney, another partner. Jeff Corrigan was the last man."

"That's right," Taggart conceded. "Crousen was a marked man in the pen because he'd tried to escape a half-dozen times. He made a deal with the boys and me. He was a lifer, but we were due to get out soon and the idea was for us to help him escape from the outside. That was the idea behind the original Whispering Legion. We were going to share alike in the mine afterwards."

"But Crousen didn't tell you where the mine was," Jim guessed. "That was his one hole-card to make sure you gents didn't forget him after the gates opened for you."

"Crousen tried to escape once too often—and died trying," Taggart went on. "The only man left alive who knew where Showdown was at was Jeff Corrigan. We headed here, bought up the Boxed Z and, using that for a cover, started expanding the Legion and working on Jeff . . ."

"Figgering if you ruined him, he'd have to go to Showdown for more gold," Jim finished for him. "But Jeff went and got hisself killed. That's why you're going to find me right useful."

"I'm listening," Taggart invited.

"Maybe Crousen told you about the little difference he had with Varney and Corrigan. Maybe you heard how Crousen built a saloon while the other two bought a pair of ranches."

"What's that got to do with it?" Taggart demanded.

"Nothing much. Only it happened that the slice of sod Tracy Varney picked for hisself was right next to my dad's Bent J spread up in the Flathead country. Varney wasn't there long, but my dad and him got to be pretty good

friends. I heard the story of Showdown mine before I was knee high to the water trough."

"Yes," Taggart encouraged eagerly.

"Well now, when you get that red book away from Helen Corrigan, it ain't gonna do you much good. Happens there was *three* red books and each one of them partners had a book. It really takes all three to figger the mine's location but, maybe with what we know between us, we could do the chore with just two of 'em. Now maybe Varney gave his book to my dad before he came down to Gateway and stopped Crousen's lead. But I reckon they ain't no sense going into details unless you gents have made up your mind whether I'm in the Legion or not."

An explosive snort echoed from the ledge above. "Don't swallow that cock-and bull-yarn, chief," Jepson cut in viciously. "He's a fast talker and he's talking twice as fast right now because it's the only thing that 'll save his skin. If yuh take him in the Legion, I'm quittin'!"

Taggart eyed his lieutenant in silence, and the thin smile again creased his lips as he turned to Jim. "Looks like it's no deal, Prince," he said. "I can't afford to lose Bull just to get you in."

"The gent certainly don't cater to me," Jim admitted ruefully.

"Bull happens to pack a grudge," Taggart confided. "You see, Bull's been the back-breaker of the crew, and he hasn't forgiven you for the way you once took a gun—and a pay-roll, away from him."

"Then supposing him and me settle our difference man to man," Jim proposed. "Maybe if he gets the poison out of his carcass, we'll be able to work together afterwards."

"What do you say to that, Bull?" Taggart asked.

"I'd plumb admire to have the chance!" the big man snapped.

"You still willing, Prince?"

THERE was a mocking light in Taggart's eyes and, suddenly Jim understood the meaning of this new phase of a deadly farce. His talk of inside knowledge about the Showdown affair hadn't impressed the Legion leader at all. The Boxed Z man had merely led him along in the hope of extracting some valuable information. Satisfied that Jim had been bluffing, Taggart was arranging a cat-and-mouse game. Taggart was probably conviced that a battle between Jim and Jepson could have only one outcome and it pleased the devil in the man to delay Jim's inevitable execution until Bull Jepson administered some punishment. To fight Jepson meant that Jim would lose even if he won, but the battle would at least give him a little longer span of life.

"I'm willing," Jim said and unhooked his gun belt. "Come down that ladder, Bull, and watch your step. I don't want you to hurt yourself gettin' here."

With a roar of rage, Bull Jepson launched himself down the ladder while Black Jack Taggart, chuckling softly, backed away to resume his place on the ledge.

For a single moment the two men faced each other in the little natural arena, the tremendous bulk of Bull towering above the slighter form of Jim. Then, with a shake of his massive shoulders, Bull rushed—and retreated with a pained look twisting his stolid face. For Jim, anticipating just such a move, had ducked beneath the other's outstretched arms, planted two hard blows in his adversary's face and danced out of the way.

Bull, apparently unconvinced that anything but an accident had caused the coup, rushed again with flailing arms. Jim repeated the procedure, fist cracking against flesh like sudden gunshot, and this time Bull sprawled to the ground.

Pulling himself to unsteady feet, Bull leaped forward, his broad face contorted by uncontrolled rage, and Jim, watching, half-smiled. This was what he wanted. He knew that defeat would be his lot if Bull ever closed with him for the man's bulk was a tremendous advantage. But Jim had one weapon unknown to the other, a knowledge of boxing. The range rider scorns the fist as a weapon but Jim was glad he had spent time mastering so unorthodox a means of defense. Now he had Bull angry and the man's wrath was, in turn, making him helpless.

It was a strange, silent fight. The onlookers, wary of the possible nearness of Pritchett, dared not shout encouragement or advice to Bull. Time after time

the big man attempted his wild rushes and each time Jim countered with well-timed blows or danced quickly out of the way. This was a battle of bludgeon against rapier and, although Jim took punishment, he knew he was slowly but surely wearing the big man down.

Jepson, his face battered and blood-streaked, breathed heavily. The fight had taken its toll from Jim, too, but he had energy to spare while his adversary had exhausted his in useless rushes. In a momentary lull, Jim glanced upward, read the face of Black Jack Taggart. The Legion leader's expression was eloquent. Taggart had expected a different turn to the battle.

That stolen glance almost finished Jim. Jepson, warier now, slid forward, launched a pile-driver blow. Jim saw it coming, lurched sideways. The blow, aimed for his head, grazed his shoulder, smashing him to the ground. Triumph flaring in his eyes, Jepson hurled himself forward with flailing boots but Jim rolled away, leaped to his feet. His smashing left spun Jepson and the right that followed hooked the big man beneath the chin. Like a felled pine, Jepson crashed to the ground and the fight was over.

Jim brushed a sleeve across his forehead. With victory his, dizziness swept him as a savage aftermath. He was weaving groggily on his feet when the man whom Taggart had sent into the tunnel burst into view.

"Pritchett's coming this way," he shouted. "He's snooping between every boulder and headin' straight for here!"

THE news was like a tonic to Jim. Just as a sudden shock will sober a drunken man, so he instantly knew that the sentry's words placed him in double jeopardy. He didn't want Pritchett to find him and he also realized that the lawman's nearness would force Taggart to play out his hand—at once.

"Pritchett, eh?" Taggart grated and stepped to the ladder. "Let him come—but don't forget our story, boys, about finding this rannyhan holed up her. Seeing the shape Bull is in, we'll say that Bull and Prince got into a fight. When Bull was down, Prince picked up a rock to finish him and . . ."

Jim didn't wait for the rest of it. He knew what was coming. Taggart had never had any intention of making a genuine compromise with him. Taggart had hoped to trade information for information and now, because Jim had learned too much, he had to die.

Mustering the last ragged edges of his strength, he darted for the ladder where Taggart squatted. The Legion leader had a gun and he aimed it just as Jim grasped the ladder, jerked it outward. It was the last thing Jim remembered. He thought he saw Taggart falling but a sheet of flame leaped downward, blinded him, and something struck the side of his head. For a moment everything was whirling chaos . . . then darkness came.

CHAPTER XV

KING'S X

WHEN Sunny Jim Prince fought his way out of the darkness enshrouding him, it seemed that the earth had become an unsteady, rocking thing. Then, as the mist cleared before his eyes, he knew he had been thrown across a horse's back. Raising a hand to his throbbing head, he found a makeshift bandage in place. He began to remember the fight with Bull Jepson in the pocket behind the cliff and the succeeding events ending with Taggart's shot. But a voice was reaching his ears, now, and as he listened to the words he forget the peril of the past in the grim realization that the present had its own dangers.

"Ain't no sense in packing this jasper back to town, Buzz," the voice said. "With a rope and a cottonwood, we can save the county the expense of trying him."

"They'll be none of that kind of play, Gallagher," the unmistakable voice of Sheriff Buzz Pritchett replied. "So you might as well forget it."

Jim put the pieces together. The sheriff had found him and taken him prisoner. That was clear enough. And it was also clear that the danger he had feared when he had attempted to elude the posse was indeed a reality. At least one man who rode with the sheriff want-

ed to dispose of him the quickest way.

Jim's hands were free. Groping, he found the saddle horn and swung himself, maneuvering to a sitting position in the saddle, a motion that brought nausea. Astonishment widened the slate-gray eyes of Buzz Pritchett who rode nearby.

"For a gent that just about cashed in his chips, you get over it mighty quick," he ejaculated. "Less'n half an hour ago, yuh was stretched out back there 'mong them boulders lookin' like yuh was dead."

"Anybody standing around weeping?" Jim asked pointedly.

"Nary a soul around," the sheriff replied. "Who creased yore skull?"

But Jim didn't answer, for he was busy putting more pieces together. Taggart must have moved his inert body to the outside of the cliff and left his horse nearby, for he was straddling Tumblebug now. Probably Pritchett had found him in this manner and had immediately headed for town, which meant that the secret of the Legion's lair was still unknown to the lawman. Jim wondered if Taggart had thought him dead or if the Legion leader had assumed that to allow him to fall into the law's hands would add up to the same thing.

"Shucks, boys," the man called Gallagher spoke up. "Are we goin' to stand for all this foolishness? Let's string this galoot up."

Jim twisted in the saddle and his eyes narrowed as he sighted Gallagher. He knew that bearded face. The last time he had seen it had been in the lair of the Legion when Gallagher, a sentry, then, had burst in to announce Jim's presence.

"Figure a rope would fix me so I couldn't talk, Gallagher?" he asked meaningly.

A gun clicked close by as the hammer was eared back. "That's all the lynch talk I aim to listen to," Buzz Pritchett said icily and the sandy moustache beneath his hawk-like nose bristled belligerently. "The next galoot that's got anything to say had better say it with a gun."

Jim grinned his appreciation, felt a surge of admiration for the sheriff. At their first meeting he had pegged the lawman as an incompetent oldster. Since, he had come to believe that Pritchett was honest, though incapable of handling the evil that had reared itself in the Gunsight. Now he was beginning to sense that Pritchett had hidden depths. Certainly the man could command respect, for the posse sank into unprotesting silence.

AND, shrouded in this silence, the posse headed through Gunsight Pass, moved across the open country toward Gateway. Once again Jim found himself riding the length of the town's main street, a prisoner of the law, and once again trail's end was the wooden jail building huddled at the end of the street. Here Pritchett led him down the narrow corridor, swung a barred door open and Jim was ordered into the identical cell that had housed him once before.

"Now if this ain't just like a trip on Round River," he reflected aloud. "I do a lot of riding—and danged if I don't end up just where I started."

With a grim chuckle, he flung himself upon the cot for his body ached from the fight with Jepson and his head still hurt though the throbbing had abated. Probing fingers told him the bullet had just creased him, a superficial wound; one that would heal readily, but one that had served to render him unconscious long enough to be used as a pawn in Taggart's game.

Thinking about his battle with Jepson, his mind moved backward to his word-battle with Taggart. Obviously the Legion leader hadn't believed the story he had told, the story of the ranch next to the Bent J spread, the ranch that had belonged to Tracy Varney. Still, Jim found time, now, to regret that he had spoken for there had been truth behind his words, more truth, possibly, than he, himself, had imagined. He didn't want Black Jack Taggart to put that truth to the test.

Strange chance had guided his rambling footsteps to Gunsight Valley, Jim decided. And stranger chance had thrust him into the nest of conspiracy that entangled the Gunsight. Having heard the legend of lost Showdown in his youth, he had forgotten it, for the lure of hidden gold held no attraction for him. Then, that stormy night, he had crouched in the rear room of the Tivoli

and heard lost Showdown mentioned once again. And he had also heard the plot against Helen Corrigan.

It was the menace to the girl that had forced him to take cards, he knew. True, he had had a deeper, more personal interest in the affair since he had listened to the dying Jeff Corrigan but he hadn't let himself think of the side of the affair that had its roots in his own Flathead country. He had never meant to speak of that, and only the thought that words would be his only weapon of defense had spurred him to tell Taggart what he had.

Probing now for the reason behind his own reticence, Jim knew that it centered around Helen, just as his every effort had been motivated by the girl. He hadn't wanted her to think he was riding in her defense for any personal reason of his own. He had wanted to convince her that Sunny Jim Prince, wandering cowpoke, could play a man's game in a man's way.

But Taggart had had a glimpse of the truth, though Taggart had obviously scorned his words. Still, the Boxed Z man might later consider the story worth investigating. Something should be done about that, he decided. Propping himself upon an elbow, he raised his voice, called for Pritchett.

A guard stalked down the corridor, peered through the door's bars. He was a tall, stony-eyed man, totally unlike Jake Shevlin who had once held the same job—and betrayed it.

"I'd like to write a letter," Jim said. "Reckon I could get fixed with paper and pencil."

"Buzz has the say-so about what letters goes out of this place," the guard snapped. "Have to see him first."

"Go and ask him."

"Buzz is busy," the other said curtly. "Seein' as how he's talking to the King of Gunsight, I ain't gonna bother him!"

Jim whistled softly as the guard spun on his heel, disappeared. So the King of Gunsight had left his office to visit the jail once again. What was prompting this move on Quayle's part? For a moment Jim toyed with the notion that the blind man had heard of his own predicament, had come in his defense. But that didn't quite fit. Somehow Jim had a hunch that gratitude was a feeling foreign to Quent Quayle.

Reasoning accordingly, he was not prepared when Pritchett himself came to the door of his cell not long after. Keys grated, the door swung on noisy hinges and the sheriff stepped aside.

"Yuh're free," the lawman announced.

Jim's eyes widened. "Why?" he asked.

THEN he saw the big form of Quent Quayle back in the corridor where the blind man leaned on his cane, his sightless eyes roving restlessly. Behind him, a shadow among shadows, was the slighter form of Sing.

"They ain't enough evidence to hold yuh on that suspicion of murderin' Jeff Corrigan charge," Pritchett told him. "The only other thing I had agin yuh was robbin' the stage. Seein' as how Quent Quayle is willing to drop that charge, I'm lettin' yuh go. As long as he got his money back and is satisfied. . . ."

"Got his money back!" Jim echoed.

"Sing found it," Quayle rasped. "He worked downward from the place on the trail where the stage was stopped."

"I can savvy that," Jim ruminated. "Even if the tracks was washed out by the rain he could still hit the trail fairly close if he took time. But how the devil did he know to dig under that pine?"

"Does the wise man bury a treasure beneath the waves of the sea," Sing asked monotonously, "when each wave looks like its thousand brothers?"

"Smart figgerin'," Jim applauded thoughtfully. "I picked a lightning-marked pine because I could remember it—and you looked for a sign that would stand out. You've got some tracker, Quayle, when he can track a man's mind."

Stepping down the corridor, Jim stretched his right hand until his finger tips touched Quayle's.

"I'm not sorry," Jim said. "I figgered on hanging onto that payroll as an extra ace. As long as you played my hand for me, I ain't kickin' because you raked in the pot. I'm thanking you for the King's X that's getting me out of here, Quayle."

But the King of Gunsight ignored the hand touching his. "You sided me once,

Prince," he jerked. "Now we're square and our trail ends here. I team with nobody."

"Seems like you expressed them sentiments before," Jim Prince said with a wry grin. "I'm hoping you'll change your mind."

"No!" the blind man snapped. "If you want to ride for me, I'll give you the chance. But you'll be my man—and you'll take my orders. Take it—or go back to the Bar Z Bar where you belong."

His tone was arrogant and his words seemingly calculated for bitterness. But Jim, from the corner of his eye, could see the open door of his cell. He owed Quayle something for his new found freedom, so he checked the words he felt like saying.

"Thanks, amigo," he said evenly. "I'll ride in my own saddle."

Without a word, Quent Quayle turned and Sing, reaching for his elbow, led him up the corridor. Jim watched them go, heard the monotonous beat of the blind man's cane die away, then turned as Pritchett nudged him.

"We found these beside yuh," the lawman said and extended Jim's guns. "They's a few questions about that deal I'd like tuh ask—but I can't make yuh answer 'em."

Jim laid a friendly hand on Pritchett's shoulder and his eyes searched the oldster's face. "Today I figgered I've had you all wrong," he told the lawman. "Maybe I can show you that you've been mistaken about me. I got a little business down the street. When I come back, we'll talk."

Striding from the jail building, Jim marched down the main street of Gateway, eyes scanning the buildings he passed. Soon a weather-beaten sign told him a one-story wooden structure was the place he sought. Shoving a protesting door inward, he stepped into a smelly room of grilled partitions and ink-stained counters—the postoffice.

The place was old and the postmaster was older, a little, dwarfish man with a quizzical, seamed face. Jim faced him through a grill.

"Pop," he asked soberly, "did you ever tell somebody a lie and try so hard to make 'em believe it that you began to believe it yourself?"

THE postmaster caressed a stubbled chin. "Shore," he admitted. "But I ain't never been able to make a lie come true."

"Maybe not," Jim agreed and, asking for paper and pencil, began to toil with a letter. When it was finished he addressed an envelope to John Prince, in care of the Bent J spread. He was about to stuff his missive in the envelope when his eyes lingered on the postmaster.

The fellow looked honest, but Jim had long since learned that the Legion had endless fingers. Moistening the pencil, he added a postscript to the letter, sealed it.

Outside again, his footsteps led him toward the livery stable. Thrusting himself into the warm darkness of the place, he was pleased to find Bub Little alone. The grimy youngster greeted him with a grin.

"I told you I'd be back to see you when trouble quit being my saddlemate," Jim said. "I ain't so shore it has, but I reckon maybe it's settin' down for a breathing spell."

"I'm bettin' it'll be sorry it ever got up, if it takes yore trail again," Bub affirmed stoutly.

"Maybe so," Jim said and slapped the boy's shoulder. "Anyhow, you can help me lick it, if you want to do me a favor."

"Name it, partner," Bub invited. "Somebody you want salivated?"

"Not today," Jim laughed. "You get much mail, Bub? Lots of girls write to you?"

"Well, one does," Bub confessed hesitantly. "She used to live here but she moved down to Bannack."

"That's fine," Jim applauded. "Nobody's going to be suspicious then, if you get a letter. You see, Bub, I wrote a letter to my dad today and I asked him to send the reply addressed to you. It'll probably have a Kalispell postmark when it comes."

"I'll be watchin' for it."

"I want that letter to go from your hand to my hand—and nowhere else. Will you see to that, Bub?"

"I will," said Bub.

"Thanks, pardner," Jim said and extended his hand. "Now I've got to go and pound some sense into the sheriff's head. So long."

But concern strode with him as he

moved up the street again. "Maybe I shouldn't have done it," he ruminated. "Still, chances are nobody'll be watching the button, but it's going to be risky. If I'm guessin' right, that letter is going to be worth its weight in . . . well, dynamite is probably the best word."

CHAPTER XVI

Where Death Waited

JIM had been in Sheriff Buzz Pritchett's office before, but never under circumstances that had allowed him time to really examine the place. Stepping into it again, he ran curious eyes over the battered desk with its stuffed pigeon-holes, the dented cuspidor flanking the desk and the flyspecked reward posters that mottled the wall. Slumping into a chair, he grinned at Pritchett who sat with legs upreared, spurs hooked into the desk's edge.

"Seems sorta nice to visit you, Sheriff," Jim remarked, "and not hear you rattle your keys. Hope you didn't mind waiting."

"Hardly knew yuh was gone," Pritchett grunted. "Had a cattle buyer in here after yuh left. The gent wants to get hisself a whole train-load of critters pronto and asked me tuh help pass the word along."

Jim's eyes flickered to a calendar on the wall. "He's some ahead of the fall roundups," he soliloquized aloud. "Reckon he's got a special order—and is willing to pay a price."

He was thinking of the rapidly vanishing herd of the Bar Z Bar. If Helen could convert her cattle into cash—and do so at a premium—she could forestall the depredations of the Legion and restock once the organization was eliminated. He'd talk it over with her soon, he decided, but there was other business to be cared for at the moment.

"As I mentioned, yuh're clear now," Pritchett said abruptly. "I ain't a gent who can say purty words like you. So what I've got to say will have tuh be said straight out. The law has no claim on yuh, Prince, but just the same I'm hopin' yuh'll vamoose. Me, I'm thinkin' yuh got irons of yore own in the fire—and I don't like the smell of 'em. Or maybe yuh're willin' to speak up and tell me why yuh've taken cards in this game."

"I'll speak up," Jim said with equal bluntness and began. With quick words he sketched the plot he had overheard at the Tivoli on the storm-swept night when he had entered Gateway. Hurrying on to the Legion's meeting, he elaborated on his escape from the cavern and the rescue of Quent Quayle, then told of the happenings of the morning when he had once again penetrated to the Legion's lair only to be trapped by Taggart and his men.

Pritchett listened silently as the tale unfolded, his face betraying varying emotions.

". . . So I happen to know that Chew-Tobacco Chaney, Gallagher, Kurt Sabin, Bull Jepson and Taggart are Legion men—and Taggart is the king-pin. I'm tellin' you, if you arrest Taggart you'll have done half the job of busting up those hellions."

"Yore yarn makes it sound that way," Pritchett admitted dubiously. "Still, them's pretty strong charges yuh're makin'. A gent could pick hisself a heap of trouble by jumpin' Black Jack Taggart if he happened to be wrong."

Jim shrugged resignedly. "You'll have to take my word for it," he said. "You've doubted me right along because I'm a stranger. You've preferred to take the word of other gents because they've lived around here for quite a spell—and I can't blame you for your stand. All I'm asking is that you listen to me this once. Ride with me to the Boxed Z now—before the Legion hears that I've been cleared. I'm bettin' Taggart makes a play when he sees me. We can let things take their course if he does—but you'll never be sorry if you bring him back with us."

Pritchett frowned thoughtfully. "I'm plumb up a stump," he admitted. "It ain't my job to just call yuh a liar, then forget this yarn yuh've spun. Still, I'm wonderin'. Yuh talk about gettin' Quayle away from the Legion—and I know that Quayle was missin' for a spell. Fact is, we was startin' out to look for him this mornin' when we cut sign on you. Afterwards Quayle come down here hot-foot and cleared yuh on that rob-

bery charge but he never give a peep about bein' held by the Legion. Why?"

"I wish I knew," Jim confessed. "If you and me and Quayle would work together we could kill ourselves a mess of coyotes in a hurry. But the King wants to do business the King's way."

"That's gospel."

"Just the same, Quayle went to the bother of squarin' me with the law. I'm saying I helped him out of a tight place when the Legion had him. The fact that he did come here to help me is the only kind of proof I've got that he owed me something."

PRITCHETT was silent, his face wrinkled in puzzlement. And Jim, sensing that words could do no more, was silent too as he waited for the lawman to reach his own decision. But many minutes ticked away before the sheriff dropped booted feet to the floor with a resounding thud, stood erect.

"I'm gamblin' on yuh," he announced. "I'll do as yuh say, this once. Are yuh ready tuh ride to the Boxed X?"

"Ready and willing," Jim grinned. "But I'm advising you to pick up a posse. I'm thinking every ranny who rides for that spread wears the Legion brand. There might be some powder-smoke burned if things come to a showdown."

He came to his feet, strode toward the door. "I'm heading down to the Tivoli to have a word with that cattle buyer, if I can find him," he announced. "Meantime, you round up some boys. And as long as you've started forming good habits by listening to me, I'm tippin' you to hand-pick your riders. It'll be better to have ten men you can depend on, than fifty men with half of 'em working for the other side."

"I'll take that tip," Pritchett said gravely as Jim bobbed through the doorway.

Five minutes later Jim was thrusting his way through the batwing doors of the Tivoli. His roving eyes scanned the handful of men who sat at the scattered tables or leaned against the long bar. A carefully-dressed rotund, little man whose florid face glistened beneath a spotless sombrero, stood with elbows hooked against the mahogany and Jim picked him for the man he sought. When he accosted him, the fellow quickly identified himself.

"Sure, I'm Dirk Hanley, the cattle buyer," he admitted affably.

"The sheriff tells me you're needin' a lot of cows—and quick," Jim began without prelude. "What premium you offerin' for that train-load?"

"Market price and five thousand dollars," Hanley answered promptly. "I'm talking about prime beef."

"The Bar Z Bar has got it," Jim said. "I'll be reportin' to my boss but I reckon I won't be overstepping by promising that we'll have the critters here for you."

"The first ones here is the ones I'll buy," Hanley said. "Will you have a drink, cowboy?"

"Sorry," Jim replied. "I've got a day's work to do before sundown."

He shook Hanley's hand, headed up the street to the jail building. It wasn't very long before Pritchett was back with a dozen men. Jim eyed them critically and decided he liked the sheriff's selection. They were youngsters mostly, cowpokes from the valley ranches who had happened to be in town; a dependable-looking bunch.

With Pritchett and Jim at the head, the little posse loped out of Gateway and headed for Gunsight Pass. Once inside the valley, they veered to the northeast, for the Boxed Z lay in that direction. Jim had reasoned that the ranch was the more logical place to find Taggart for the Legion leader would surely shun the cavern until he learned whether its secret was still safe or not. If the ranch were deserted, Jim intended to talk the sheriff into turning back to the cave.

Since the riders trailed behind, Jim talked only to Pritchett who rode at his side. Encouraged by the lawman's offer to cooperate this once, Jim used the opportunity to outline his pet scheme, the plan he had presented to Quayle at the hidden coulee. He spoke at length of organizing vigilantes but Pritchett only grunted replies and otherwise maintained a moody silence. Jim, sensing that some misgivings were probably riding with the sheriff, decided it was not the time to press the matter.

"Here's hoping Taggart's at home," he ruminated to himself. "Gettin' support from Quent Quayle will be like eat-

ing cactus. If I can convert Pritchett, it's going to help a lot."

THE day was dying fast. The sun, dipping behind the western hills, paved the floor of the valley with gold, sent elongated silent shadows marching beside the silent posse. When they were within three miles of the Boxed Z, the sun was just disappearing behind a prong-like peak and Jim jerked his horse to a stop.

"What's eatin' yuh?" Pritchett demanded quickly.

"A snake, I reckon," Jim reported quickly. "I just saw a sun-flash from field glasses. I'm thinking Black Jack Taggart is expecting us."

Pritchett grunted and urged his mount forward. Silently the posse moved on. Jim scanned the distance for that betraying flash but failed to see it again. Remembering the curious eyes that had greeted his entrance at the Tivoli in search of the cattle buyer, he wondered if the ears of the Whispering Legion had already heard of the latest developments in Gateway. If Taggart knew he had been freed, the Legion leader would have reason to be worried. Perhaps the man who had used the field glasses was now hurrying to report the nearing posse to the Boxed Z prod. Trouble was apt to be waiting at trail's end.

Jim was prepared for a gunfire welcome as they dipped over a little bluff and moved down to the Boxed Z ranch buildings spread below. But the place was a picture of peace. Jim was running his eye over ranch house, corrals, barn and bunkhouse when a rider suddenly spurted into view from behind the ranch house and galloped away at an angle that took him farther from the posse.

Pritchett's nerves were on edge. He betrayed his tension by reaching for a gun, but Jim grasped his wrist. He had studied the fleeing rider and knew it was neither Taggart, Sabin nor Jepson.

"Small fry," he told the sheriff. "We'll likely find bigger game at the ranch house."

But something about that retreating figure seemed to make Pritchett overly wary. He ordered his posse to spread out fan-wise, and in this formation they approached the buildings. There Pritchett issued more orders, delegating some to inspect the bunkhouse, others to look into the barn and still others to search the blacksmith shop and other buildings.

"I'm stepping into the house," he said. "Prince, I reckon yuh'll want to trail along. The rest of yuh make yore look-see fast and move up to the porch. If I ain't out pronto, come in after me."

Jim nodded, ran his eyes about, inventorying the scene before him. It was his first visit to Taggart's ranch and he saw the Boxed Z was well kept, the buildings new. Gaudy paint showed no signs of the ravages of weather. But Jim was noticing other things, too. The corrals were empty and no smoke issued from the ranch house. An atmosphere of desertion squatted on the place like brooding evil.

Striding beside the sheriff, he mounted the porch steps and waited while Pritchett pounded on the door. There was no response to the repeated clamor and the sheriff, with a shrug, threw the door open and they stepped inside.

The interior of Taggart's ranch house was elegantly furnished and as they threaded their way through the rooms Jim reflected that other people's money had probably paid for the splendor in which Taggart lived. No one appeared to contest their presence.

"Looks like nobody's home," Pritchett pointed needlessly.

"I'm guessing Taggart heard we were coming and decided he didn't want to see us," Jim commented.

TOGETHER they made their way to the kitchen. The rear door of the building, leading off of the cook's domain, was open and Jim thought of the rider who had left so quickly. A cooking range, cupboards, a little table and chairs furnished the room. Jim glanced everywhere. Then he noticed a trap door in the floor, obviously leading to a cellar beneath the house.

"Reckon as good a place for a gent to hide as any would be down there," he said and, stepping across the room, grasped the handring, raised the hinged door. A tiny wisp of smoke curled upward.

"It 'pears like something's burnin'—" Buzz Pritchett began but he never finished his words. In one blurring

motion, Jim slammed the trap door and hurled himself bodily against the sheriff. His shoulder struck Pritchett—hard; sent the lawman hurtling through the open kitchen door and down the rear steps with Jim sprawling on top of him.

"What the devil! . . ." Pritchett spluttered.

But there was no time for Jim to tell the man what he feared. There was no time to explain how that tiny wisp of smoke had told him that Taggart, anticipating the purpose of their visit, had planned a death trap for them. For Jim knew—now—why one rider had lingered at the deserted Boxed Z while the others had fled.

"Run!" he choked. "Run for . . ."

His words were lost in the *Hrr—umpf!* of exploding dynamite.

CHAPTER XVII

The Red Book

THE difference between one minute and another was the difference between death and life for Sunny Jim Prince and Sheriff Buzz Pritchett. Only the fact that Jim had grasped the situation in the ranch house saved them. Flattened to the ground by the concussion of the explosion, both men lay huddled while death and debris showered down. The earth seemed to rock and roar for an endless eternity but in reality the force of the blast was quickly expended, an indication that Taggart had counted on catching them inside the house.

Suddenly the peril was past. The shouting posse, rushing from the other buildings, aided the stunned pair to their feet, pawed them frantically. The ranch house, a shell-like ruin, had burst into flames. Jim glanced at it, felt himself gingerly and tested the ground with a cautious step. He found that no bones had been broken although he had been bruised by the shower of debris. But had Pritchett fared as well?

"You hurt, Buzz?" the cowboy asked.

It took the sheriff a long moment to reply. Eyes hard, Pritchett stared at the gutted ranch house, his face fixed in stony lines, his moustache rigid with wrath. "Not hurt enough to be ridin'," he said slowly. "And that's what I aim tuh do—straight for that cave yuh was tellin' me about!"

But Pritchett was not to ride as quickly as he supposed. His horse lay before the ranch house and a glance showed that it would never carry its master along the justice trail again. Tumblebug and the other horses had stampeded across the twilight-dimmed prairie and the sheriff joined the posse in a chase for mounts.

Half an hour later a sullen, morose posse moved across the range, headed for the eastern wall of the valley. Pritchett and Jim rode double but before they had crossed the valley, the cowboy reined short.

"I'll be leaving you, Buzz," he said. "I aim to get over to the Bar Z Bar and see my boss, pronto. If I thought there'd be any powder burned tonight I'd shore lope along but I'm bettin' my best Stetson you'll find the cave easy enough from what I've told you—and likewise that you'll find it empty, considerin'."

"Yuh're probably right," Pritchett agreed as he swung to the ground, "but the place is worth a look-see." He extended a bony hand to the cowboy. "I'm listening to anything yuh've got tuh say, from here on," he continued. "Likewise I aim tuh call on every gent in the valley that can be trusted. Reckon we can start a Legion of our own, like yuh said; one that won't be whisperin' but talkin' right out loud—with sixes!"

"You can count me in," Jim promised, and turned his face toward the Bar Z Bar.

He was warmed on the long ride that followed by the reflection that he had gained a victory. True, convincing Pritchett of Taggart's true status had almost cost two lives, but with the sheriff now thoroughly aroused it was probably worth it. Pritchett would be working day and night to speed the Legion's downfall.

And now another victory could be gained. Once Helen Corrigan's depleted herd was turned into cash, the Legion could no longer take nightly toll from the Bar Z Bar.

Within an hour he was telling her about it across the supper table. He had other things to tell her, too; things

that had to do with his release from the law's charge and his newly-made alliance with Pritchett. But he skimmed over these, emphasizing his meeting with the cattle-buyer and the proposition Dirk Hanley had made. She was quick to see the reasoning behind his interest in such an opportunity.

"We'll do it!" she declared. "I'll have the boys start cutting out the prime stuff tomorrow. We'll get that train-load into town so fast the buyer's head will swim."

IT thrilled Jim to see the fighting flame that was her heritage fanned to life again. Jeff Corrigan's passing and the subsequent raids of the Legion had made her weary of the unequal fight but now, with hope glimmering, she was the energetic Helen he had first seen in the Tivoli.

Her enthusiasm was contagious and it seemed to lend energy to the entire ranch in the days that followed. They were busy days. From morning until night the Bar Z Bar was in the saddle, cutting out the cattle that would be driven to Gateway, hastily erecting a large corral to pen the beef until delivery day, searching the far-flung acres of the spread for strays. And Jim and Helen rode with the rest.

It was the first opportunity Jim had to really meet the crew of the Bar Z Bar. There were only a half dozen riders. The Legion had long since scared out the others or bought them off, but the six who remained were the personification of loyalty. From Kid Chalmers, a sandy-haired youngster scarcely out of his teens, to loquacious old Maverick Meyers who had rode the Chisholm Trail—and never allowed the others to forget it—they were a salty, hard riding bunch.

They were goaded by the fact that the bonus offered by Dirk Hanley would undoubtedly be an incentive to every valley stock man to try for the prize. The thought drove the Bar Z Bar relentlessly for three long days but on the morning of the fourth day they learned they had no competition to fear.

Buzz Pritchett brought the news. Loping across the dew-diamond prairie in the first flush of dawn, he found Jim and Helen as the girl issued the day's orders to the hands. Jim greeted the lawman with a solemn stare.

"Look at me real hard," the cowboy advised. "You're seeing the ruination of an ideal. I'd aimed on holding my job on this spread without doing any work. The boss, here, figgered different."

Pritchett grinned. "Maybe I can save yore pore back from being plumb busted," he said. "I've got some news for Miss Corrigan which might sorta make her ease up on yuh. 'Pears the word got around that the Bar Z Bar was trying mighty hard to fill that beef order. The ranchers hereabouts figger the spread is entitled to the chance, seein' how it's been hit pretty hard, so they're gonna lay off and let yuh grab the deal. Sort of a tribute tuh Jeff Corrigan, yuh might say."

"Now what do you think of that?" Jim asked.

"It's splendid," Helen replied, her eyes shining. "Far too splendid to talk about. And all the ranchers agreed."

"Wa-al, yes," Pritchett drawled. "A lot of 'em were all for it—and the rest had to sorta fall in line. In one or two instances I hinted that it would look plumb suspicious if they didn't. Seein' as how the Legion always rode herd on this spread, it wouldn't look too good for any of yore neighbors tuh want to buck yuh."

"You've been calling on the ranchers," Jim said in a burst of understanding. "You've been organizing them!"

"That's the idea. That cave was plumb empty t'other night but I got a bunch of boys guarding that hole in the cliff night and day. If any of them rannyhans make the mistake of poking their noses back again, they'll shore get a surprise."

"What about Chew-Tobacco and Gallagher?"

"They packed up and vamoosed," Pritchett replied. "Me, I ain't been huntin' 'em very hard. Too busy. Just about talked myself dry here lately and aim tuh call on more ranchers tuhday. I'm wonderin' if yuh'd come with me, seein' as how it ain't gonna be no race tuh get them critters tuh town?"

Jim grinned broadly. "I'm a son of toil these days," he said. "I sure hate to turn my back on the labor hereabouts."

"Like I said, I ain't no word artist,"

Pritchett argued. "I can't spill pretty speech like you can. I'd shore like to have yuh come along and do part of the gabbin'."

"Go on with him," Helen urged with a laugh. "The boys will have the beef ready for the drive by this afternoon. I'll give them a rest and we'll start for town tomorrow morning—early."

It was enough incentive for Jim. Organizing the ranchers was his own pet scheme and he relished an opportunity to actually take a part in it. He had tried to interest Quent Quayle in the plan and had failed. But Buzz Pritchett was genuinely interested. Jim found that out as they rode through the long hours of the morning, shaking hands with a dozen horny-handed cattlemen, outlining the scheme of a vigilante organization.

PRITCHETT, who knew the valley people well, chose to avoid some ranches. This was at the suggestion of Jim who pointed out, once again, that it would be better to have a small but dependable group than a large organization that might have some of the enemy in its very midst. Whenever the sheriff entertained a doubt as to the worthiness of a rancher, he passed the place by. As a whole, Jim applauded the sheriff's selection for such men as they enlisted were level-eyed, honest-faced cattlemen. The vigilantes would contain the real backbone of the Gunsight country.

When the sun swung at zenith, Pritchett decided to head toward Gateway, calling at the ranches that were on the trail to town. Jim, feeling that he might be needed at the Bar Z Bar in spite of Helen's assurance that the work could easily be finished without him, left the lawman and turned toward the ranch. With him rode a feeling that the morning had been well spent.

"Nails for the coffin of the Whispering Legion," he reflected grimly. "All we'll be needin' is a chance to drive the nails."

It was a lazy day—a day to amble across the rolling rangeland, dragging extra minutes out of a journey for the sheer joy of being under the sky. Instead, Jim found himself goading Tumblebug and he grinned as he searched his mind for the reason. It had become habit to hurry whenever Helen waited at the end of the trail. It would be mighty nice to always be coming home to her, he decided. Perhaps, some day, he would be.

Skirting a corner of the Bar Z Bar, he sighted a rising dust cloud in the distance. It was the riders, hazing the last of the picked beef toward the big corral near the ranch house. The waddies were moving far too slow for the mood of Jim Prince so he did not turn to join them but hurried on toward the ranch house. With the spread short-handed, Helen had assumed the duties of cook and he was sure he would find her at the house preparing a meal, since a chuck-wagon had not been utilized for the roundup.

The dust cloud had almost vanished behind him when he reached the ranch house and his eyes narrowed suspiciously as they swept the scene. Two horses stood before the main building. One of them, a little paint, he recognized as being Helen's mount. But the other?

Urged by something that had almost grown to be habit, Jim slid from his own horse, stalked toward the waiting cayuse. Murmuring soothing words, he raised the right hind hoof and examined it quickly, but the mark he sought was not there. Probably the mount of some neighboring rancher who had stopped by for a visit, he decided and grinned, wondering what the owner might have thought had he caught the cowboy scanning that hoof. Then his grin froze as something that sounded like a muffled scream came from the house.

Like a released thunderbolt, Jim leaped to the porch, launched himself through the doorway and into the living room. For a single second he paused in the doorway, then galvanized into action.

Helen was in the room, struggling in the grip of a blackhooded man. He had twisted the girl's arm behind her, was forcing it upward while one hairy paw was clamped over her mouth to prevent further outcry.

A red haze swam before the eyes of Jim Prince. He forgot the guns swinging at his thighs, forgot everything but a mad desire to maim. With fists swinging, he leaped across the room and his blow sent the masked man sprawling backward over a chair. Snarling, the fellow got to his feet, hand clawing for a gun. Jim's outflung arm swept Helen to

a side of the room, then he closed with the man. A savage twist of his wrist wrenched the gun from the Legion man, sent it flying. Jim straightened his adversary with a vicious uppercut, sent him lurching backward with a stiff body jolt.

ALL of his hatred of the Legion was in that blow. Furniture smashed under the impact of the man's body as he staggered, tried to recover his balance. The fireplace stopped him as he thudded against it, his head snapping backward against the hard edge of the mantelpiece. With a low moan, he sank unconscious to the floor. Jim, standing with legs apart, panting with exertion and anger, relaxed as the fellow sagged.

Then Helen was across the room, in his arms. "Thank heavens you came, Jim," she sobbed. "He'd have broken my arm in another minute. He found me here alone, grabbed me before I could reach a gun. He said he'd been sent for that red book they want so badly, and wouldn't listen when I told him I didn't know where it was. He was going to make me talk. . . ."

"He'll never make that mistake again," Jim said soothingly. "I'll take him to Pritchett this afternoon."

Stepping across to the motionless man, he jerked the mask, looked into the bearded face of Gallagher, Legion sentry. He hoisted the man to his shoulder.

"I'll move him out to the blacksmith shop and snap a padlock on the door," he told the girl. "Better not say anything to the boys. They'd probably want to string him to the corral gate and he might be of some use to Pritchett—alive."

With the prisoner locked up, he returned to the ranch house to find Helen trying to right the scattered furniture. Jim surveyed the havoc. The table had been hopelessly wrecked and one chair wobbled on three legs. Even the fireplace mantelpiece had been jarred out of place and Jim carefully straightened it.

"It was shore no way to act in a parlor," he said lightly, "but . . ."

Then something made him forget what he had intended to say. That something was a loose stone in the fireplace. Jeff Corrigan had built the fireplace himself, making it from stones that were fitted so snugly against each other that the mortar scarcely showed. Now one stone was ajar, shaken out of place by the impact of Gallagher's body.

Whistling softly, Jim tested the stone, found that it moved beneath his hand. Strangely stirred, he lifted it from its place and a yawning hole gaped like a missing tooth against the whiteness of the fireplace. Plunging a hand into the cavity, he felt something smooth beneath his groping fingers.

Even before he jerked the article into view, something told him what it would be. This was the secret hiding place Jeff Corrigan had tried to speak about before he died and in Jim's hand was the little red book the Legion was trying so desperately to get. For years the fireplace had kept Jeff Corrigan's secret for him, hiding the key to lost Showdown.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Fourth White Star

IN stunned silence, Jim stared at his find, then wordlessly handed the Red Book to Helen. She had watched him with rounded eyes, aware of the importance of his discovery and, with fingers fumbling in haste, she began to turn the pages of the little book.

"It's Dad's all right," she announced in a hushed voice. "I know the handwriting. . . . But it doesn't make much sense for all that it does give is a detailed description of Gunsight Valley . . . with directions for reaching a certain section of the valley."

Jim peered over her shoulder, read some of the words in the cramped writing, now faded by the years. There was mention of landmarks, details that pointed a trail to the eastern wall of the valley, but no mention of a specific spot.

"Looks like the Legion was excited about nothing," the girl ruminated at last. "This book certainly doesn't tell where the mine is located."

"It wouldn't," Jim mused aloud. "Each of the partners had a book. One probably told how to find Gunsight Valley. That would have been important at the time, since the valley wasn't settled and known then. This book of your dad's tells how to reach a certain section of the

valley, but that spot is plenty big. The third book would tell how to get to the mine after locating the section."

He snapped his fingers emphatically. "That's it," he decided. "The partners could find the mine at any time. The books were made in order to have a record in case anything happened. And they split the record three ways so that any part of it would be useless if it fell into the wrong hands."

He paused, suddenly aware that he had been thinking aloud, and saw Helen eyeing him quizzically as she listened.

"Jim," she said evenly. "The night that . . . that Dad spoke of Showdown, I watched you pretty close. I had a feeling, then, you knew more about what was going on than you pretended. Dad's story hit you right between the eyes, made you decide to take a hand in the game."

His pleasant face serious, he studied her before speaking. "Maybe you've hit the truth, Helen," he said at last. "Maybe I could have added a bit to your dad's story—things I'd heard on my dad's Bent J spread when I was a younker. But I didn't want to show my hand . . ."

"Why?" she asked bluntly.

"Because a certain miss had figgered me plumb wrong," he confessed. "I'd already decided to take cards on account of her. If I'd told her everything I knew, she'd have known right off that she was making a mistake. But I wanted to convince her in my own way. Can you savvy that?"

"A woman can always understand such things," she said softly. "But a woman has curiosity, too, Jim. How much did you know about Showdown mine?"

His familiar grin returned. "You'd shore like to know, wouldn't you," he tantalized. "When we drive the cattle to town, I expect there'll be a letter waiting from my Dad. When I get that letter, I'll have all the pieces to the puzzle, I'm thinking. I promise I'll tell you everything then."

"That's fair enough, Jim Prince," she said and extended the Red Book. "In the meantime, I'm asking you to keep this for me. It's probably too valuable to leave here."

He took the little book silently, robbed of words by her gesture in giving it to him. Their's had been a strange feud, his and Helen's, based on misunderstanding and mistrust, but now Jim knew she had learned to trust him completely. He stowed the book away carefully.

"Whenever you want this," he said solemnly, "it'll be ready for you."

FOR a long moment their eyes met, clung and then heavy boots tramped across the porch while cattle bawled outside, bringing the pair to the realization that the riders had brought the last of the beef to the big corral. Maverick Meyers tapped, thrust his grizzled head through the doorway.

"Reckon I'm gettin' so's I jump at my own shadder," the old cowpoke said, "but just the same, I figgered I oughta report they's a big fire burnin' up on Sentinel. Sorta looks like some kinda signal. Probably don't mean anythin'."

Jim and Helen gazed at each other with startled eyes. A signal fire might not mean anything to Maverick, but the fact had its significance for the girl and man. They hurried to the porch, studied the red tongue of the beacon that darted upward from the side of the mountain. Once again the Whispering Legion was calling its hellish brood together.

"I don't like it," Jim told the girl. "Sending Gallagher here in daylight was a pretty bold stroke. I'm thinking Taggart's back is crowding the wall. Even if Black Jack's been holing up somewhere these last few days, he probably knows everything that's going on. I'm wondering what he's up to, now."

"Do you suppose he's heard about our deal with the cattle buyer?" Helen mused. "Would he be massing his men to strike at the herd when we start to town in the morning?"

"I think you've guessed it!" Jim exclaimed. "But maybe we could fool him if . . ."

He checked his words, left his plan unspoken. The riders of the Bar Z Bar were crowded before the porch, watching that far-away fire. These cowpokes were tired, dog-tired, and they showed it. A Legion raid might be circumvented by taking the cattle to town at once but Jim, who had ridden with the crew, could appreciate that they were in no shape for the arduous hours of a trail drive. It was too much to ask of them.

Then Maverick Meyers, one squinted eye fixed on the beacon, spoke up. "If yuh're thinkin' that blaze means Black Jack Taggart is plannin' hisself some fresh deviltry, we ought tuh fool him by moving the cattle pronto," the oldster declared. "We could get the beef intuh town while he was waiting for his hellions tuh get together."

And, one by one, the riders of the Bar Z Bar voiced their approval of Maverick's suggestion. It was as though they understood their boss's reluctance to ask such a favor of them and had taken the matter into their own hands. That sign of their unselfish loyalty touched Helen. Her eyes glistened with sudden mist, but only for a moment. Then, like the general that she was, she was grasping the opportunity that had been presented to her.

"I'll get some chuck ready," she announced. "You boys take an hour's rest, pick yourselves fresh horses. The Bar Z Bar is going to move beef."

But the cowboys were ready and waiting before the hour was up. It was as though the challenge of the burning beacon had given them new energy. Astride fresh mounts, they were busy hazing the cattle out of the big pole corral. Jim, heading for the blacksmith shop, found a recovered Gallagher sullenly nursing a swollen jaw.

"We're going to Gateway," Jim told him. "You're coming along, and I'm handing you over to the sheriff when we get there. Meantime, we can use a rider, so you're gonna nurse some critters. If that ain't agreeable, then I reckon I'll have to tell the boys all about your business here today which will be plumb disappointin' to Buzz Pritchett—since he'll have to ride out here and cut you down from where you'll be hanging."

Gallagher growled an incoherent reply but, later, when Jim explained the situation to the hands, the Legion man took his place in a saddle to work with the others. Jim had issued an order for a Bar Z Bar man to keep an eye on the enemy in their midst.

Soon the afternoon sun was looking down on the big herd of the Bar Z Bar heading toward Gateway. It was nearly fifteen miles to town but the drive could be finished before darkness settled without pushing the cattle too hard. Ordinarily such a drive would have taken a day but Helen had decided it would be better to risk running some tallow off the cattle rather than delay and perhaps fall into the Legion's hands.

CORRALS would be waiting at Gateway. Dirk Hanley would have seen to that. Once the herd was in those corrals, the work of the ranch would be finished. It would be up to Hanley to see that the beef reached railhead where cattle cars would convey the critters to faraway stockyards.

Much bawling and excitement marked the commencement of the drive, but once the cattle were under way, they moved forward steadily, almost eagerly, for most of them had been penned up for many hours.

The shifting sun marked off the weary miles. The day began to fade toward the west and then the hills swallowed the sun and the sky was tinged with the rioting colors of the afterglow. The beacon on Sentinel had been short-lived, long since dying to nothing, but Jim, whose eyes were often on that mighty peak, saw a new flame spearing the settling dusk.

He was quick to sense the reason for the second beacon. Taggart, knowing the law was on his trail, would not have lingered on the mountainside to tend the first beacon. Probably the Legion heads had started the fire, then quickly deserted the spot. Now they had ventured to return and ignite a second beacon to insure that all of the scattered members of the organization would see one beacon or the other.

Once the cattle were in the Pass, it would be no great chore to herd them along for the walls of the defile would keep them headed in the right direction. Jim dropped to the rear where Helen rode, moved his mount beside hers. She, too, had seen the second beacon, was studying it.

"I don't like it," he said without prelude. "Got a notion to take a little jaunt for myself. Sorta make sure the trail is clear up ahead."

She nodded, and he spurred away. But once he had put the moving queue of cattle behind him, he turned to the left and headed toward the hills.

The beacon had began to fade. No sense in seeking out the spot where it

had burned, but somewhere among the foothills, he reasoned, he might find the men who had fired the beacon for they would have quickly deserted the mountainside, worked their way back down into the valley. And some place in the valley was the new meeting place of the Legion.

Riding cautiously, every sense alert to danger, Jim pursued his man-hunt. Within an hour he was among the foothills where the rough terrain forced him to slowness. And so he rode, ears tuned for the slightest sound foreign to the night.

It proved well that he had adopted such caution. A rising moon tipped the eastern hills, flooded Gunsight Valley with its light. Here among the foothills there were sheltering shadows and Jim was hugging one of these when he saw four riders starkly outlined against the crest of a bluff. Even from the distance, he knew they were wearing hoods.

Silently he dismounted and moved forward. Testing each footfall first, he skulked nearer and nearer to where the four sat their horses, talking. Chokecherry bushes and thorn-apple grew in profusion on the sides of the ravines and Jim wormed among their shadows, hugging the ground. Soon he was close enough for the blur of sound from the four to become coherent words.

"Granting that a lot of the boys didn't see the first fire, it'll take at least three hours before the bunch is together," one of them said and Jim was sure the muffled voice was Taggart's. "It was lucky we picked a new meeting place after Prince busted up that last meeting. Pritchett's got the cave sewed up tight with a bunch of deputies."

"SHORE, it'll take three hours," the heavy voice of Bull Jepson boomed. "Just the same, I'm thinkin' yuh're loco, Boss, if yuh ride tuh town and see that gent. He ain't to be trusted."

"I'm going to risk it," Taggart snarled. "He means business of some kind—and I want to know what it is. Gallagher hasn't showed back so he probably run into that devil, Prince, at the Bar Z Bar. I tell you, everything's gone wrong lately and we ain't got much to lose by going to Gateway and calling on this gent."

Jepson grunted and the other two remained silent—the slighter man whom Jim had decided was Kurt Sabin and the fourth man who also wore a white star.

"Any of you gents got the makin's?" the fourth man suddenly asked.

Jim watched someone extend tobacco. Fascinated, he saw the play of fingers as the fellow twisted a quirley into shape. With a careless gesture, the man threw back his hood, wetted the cigarette. A match scratched, blossomed into flame, and, for an instant, the face of the fourth man was clearly revealed in the flare.

The quartet nudged their horses, moved over the crest of the bluff, dipped out of sight. Jim slowly counted to a hundred, listening all the while to the retreating hoof beats. Clambering down the hillside, he found Tumblebug and headed toward the pass to intercept the herd.

There was food for thought in the things he had learned. Black Jack Taggart, for instance, was going to risk a trip to Gateway before he joined his men. Who had sent for the Legion leader? That was something worth investigating, Jim decided. He'd look into it when he reached town. Maybe Taggart could be captured this very night.

The herd was almost through the pass when he joined it, the dust cloud hanging like silver mist in the moonlight. Helen still tagged behind and Jim joined her at once. With Gateway almost in sight, the girl's eyes were shining and she greeted him cheerfully.

"Sight the enemy?" she asked.

"Nary a soul," he replied and lapsed into silence.

The lie came hard. Today he had learned that she trusted him completely and he knew it was his duty to return that trust by reporting the thing he had discovered. But with trail's end and success in sight, Helen was very happy. He couldn't find the words to blast that happiness by telling her that the suspicion that had long tortured him had become certainty.

For the fourth white star, insignia of leadership in the Whispering Legion, was worn by Bert Harris, foreman of the Bar Z Bar.

CHAPTER XIX

"We Strike Tonight!"

WHERE a peeled-pole corral, outside of Gateway, gleamed in the moonlight like interlocked skeleton fingers, the trail drive reached its end; a successful end for no one had molested them on the journey. Jim, silent and busy with his own thoughts since he had rejoined the drive, threw himself into the task of herding the cattle into the corral. It took the combined skill of all the Bar Z Bar riders for the stock, tired and irritable now, was more than refractory. When the chore was completed it was discovered that Gallagher had managed to slip away in the confusion.

"Might as well forget about him," Jim decided. "I'm for reporting to Hanley and calling it a night."

Together the little group moved up the street. Jim had a hunch the cattle-buyer could be found at the Tivoli and he mentioned his belief to Helen as they neared the saloon.

"You go inside and look, Jim," she suggested. "Take the boys with you for they'll probably be needing a drink. I'll wait out here."

But Jim, remembering that Taggart had intended to ride into town, didn't like her suggestion. "I'm thinking somebody ought to stay with you," he said. "Gallagher may be prowling about—and others besides. They've grown too bold to suit me."

She could not deny the logic behind his fear and when his eyes probed the faces of the riders, young Kid Chalmers volunteered, somewhat reluctantly, to keep his boss company. With the others at his heels, Jim pushed the bat-wing doors aside and entered the Tivoli. The place was crowded, the air blue with smoke. A tinny piano banged discordantly in one corner, vied with the shuffling of boots, the clink of glasses, in an effort to create a bedlam of its own.

Dirk Hanley was there, propped against the bar in almost identically the same posture that Jim had first found him. His florid face broadened with a grin as he sighted the cowboy.

"Just got word that you'd brought in the beef," Hanley said. "Aimed on heading down to the corral pronto."

"The critters are just pining away for you to come and tally 'em," Jim told him. "Want to go down now?"

"Morning will do," the buyer replied with a wave of a puffy hand. "If the count's right, there'll be a check at the Stockmen's Bank for you."

The Bar Z Bar riders were lined along the mahogany. "Aimin' tuh wash down the part of Gunsight Valley that's stickin' to our gullets," Maverick put it. But Jim did not linger for a drink. He was anxious to rejoin Helen and tell her the deal was as good as completed.

Accordingly, he excused himself as quickly as possible, and, leaving the riders behind, stepped outside and up the street. Though horses lined the hitch-rails before the saloons, the board walk was deserted of humans. Interlacing shadows from the false-fronted buildings made the street a murky tunnel as he peered ahead, seeking the girl. Hurrying along in this fashion, he stumbled and almost fell headlong over something huddled in his pathway.

It was a man and Jim, almost skirting him, grinned for he had cataloged the fellow as some waddie who had tried to drink his way from one saloon to another and had lost his legs in the bout with alcohol. But just as he side-stepped the man he heard a groan. Instantly Jim was on his knees, hand fumbling for a match. He cupped the tiny flame, bent closer—and knew stark fear.

The man's face was a mass of blood for he had been struck on the side of the head by something heavy. Beneath that gory mask he was almost unrecognizable, but Jim knew him. It was Kid Chalmers!

CRADLING the sandy head in his arms, he saw the youngster's lids quiver and then vacant eyes stared into his.

"Kid!" Jim jerked. "Speak up. What happened? Where's Helen?"

"Taggart," Kid mumbled thickly. "Hit me before I could get my gun. Him and Jepson . . . Sabin . . . Gallagher, too. Tried to make it to the Tivoli. . . ."

Jim swore. The very thing he had feared had taken place in spite of his precaution! But where had they taken the

girl? They couldn't have gotten very far, he knew. Eyes darting into the darkness, he realized that every minute would count now.

"I got to be going, partner," he told the youngster. "I'd better pack you to the saloon and . . ."

"Prop me against a wall," the Kid muttered. "Don't . . . waste time . . . Jim."

Lips tight, Jim decided to follow the suggestion. Placing the youngster so he could lean against a building in a sitting position, he hastily bound the wound with his neck-scarf. The riders, coming from the Tivoli, would find the boy. Content with the thought, Jim thundered on down the street.

There was nothing to see—no trail to follow. Suddenly the futility of his search struck him. Pausing, he felt the coolness of the night breeze and it partially subdued the fever of fear burning within him. He could gain nothing by dashing wildly about the town. Better to return for the boys, begin a systematic search. Still . . .

His roving eyes, scanning the false-fronted buildings, probing the shadows, had detected a strange glimmer of light. It was in a second story window but it was there only for an instant. Then it vanished as though a blanket had been moved into position over the window.

That window was in a building Jim recognized, the huge, silent structure Sam Crousen had built long years ago. Why should there be a light in a deserted building?

Spurred by the question, Jim crossed the street, examined the front of the ghostly place. The broken hasp still hung from the door just as he had left it on the night when he had captured Chew-Tobacco Chaney, dragged him inside. He had brought Chaney here since the place had appealed to him as a likely spot to hold a prisoner in a hostile town. Had Taggart and his men reasoned in the same manner?

He tested the door carefully, mindful of creaking hinges. Some large object, probably a table, had been placed against the door from the inside, barring progress. Here was proof that someone was within.

To force the barrier would be to create a commotion. Warned by the noise, those inside would either escape or prepare themselves for the intruder. Another means of entrance would have to be found so, leaving the door, Jim backed away, scanned the front of the building.

A low porch ran the full width of the structure. Kicking off his boots, Jim silently clambered to the roof of the porch. Edging along, he found places in the false-front of the building where he could secure hand and footholds. Taking advantage of these, he quickly swung himself to the flat roof of the building.

Once upon the roof, he had reasoned that he might find the means of swinging down and into an upstairs window for some of these were not boarded. Now he realized that such a move would not be necessary. The rooftop was studded with trap-doors, obviously placed to allow ventilation in the second-story rooms which would otherwise be ovens under a hammering summer sun. Pausing to repicture the building as he had seen it when the sliver of light had vanished, he quickly determined which trap-door opened into the room where the light had been. Tiptoeing to that section of the roof, he eased the trap-door back, inch by inch.

The roof opening was about two feet square and it allowed a partial view of the room below. It was the room he had been looking for, he knew. A saddle blanket was stretched across the window and he was also aware that someone was holding a lantern. It sent bobbing, grotesque shadows dancing into the corners and it revealed Helen. The girl was bound to a chair.

THE man who held the lantern was beyond Jim's range of vision. Shuffling boots told of more than one man below. But one was speaking, and that one was Black Jack Taggart.

"So you think I'm overstepping myself," he was taunting the girl. "You say Jim Prince will tear me apart for this. Well, you little hell-cat, Jim Prince is the least of my worries. I'd have had his hide nailed to the wall long ago, if it wasn't for his fool luck."

"You talk big — as usual," the girl flared, anger coloring her cheeks. "You know that Jim has been your stumbling block ever since he came to the Gunsight.

And he'll be your downfall in the end."

"What are we wastin' time for?" the heavy voice of Bull Jepson asked. "We've stalled around town plenty long now, waiting to see the gent that sent for yuh. Now we'll have the Bar Z Bar buzzing at our tails. Let's make her talk—and talk fast. Then we can see that jasper and get tuh hell out of town."

"Shore, Bull's right," Sabin's voice interjected. "No use stallin'."

"My friends aren't very chivalrous," Taggart said mockingly. "Just the same, they're right. You know very well why we've brought you here, so we won't waste words. Where is that red book?"

"I haven't got it," Helen retorted, then hastily amended her words. "I don't know where it is. My father never lived to say where he'd hidden it."

"I know that!" Taggart snapped. "But you've had time to search the house from top to bottom since. Now quit stalling and tell me where the book is!"

Helen's lips tightened and her face was white and strained in the chalky glare of the lantern. "I haven't anything to say," she insisted evenly. "You're wasting your time."

Above, Jim was fighting an impulse to drop through the ceiling, take a hand in the game. But that would have to be a last resort, he knew. Cold reason told him that he would be at a tremendous disadvantage since the commotion that would come with forcing his body through the opening would warn those below. Now mingling emotions goaded him to the desperation point for he realized why Helen was holding her tongue. The red book was in his pocket. To admit that fact would be to jeopardize him.

"Listen, you hell-cat," Taggart snarled and came into Jim's view as he stepped closer to Helen. "Every man that rides for me is waiting inside Gunsight Valley—or will be soon. I'd figgered on grabbing your cattle until Gallagher, here, told me you'd already moved them. Just the same, I can still make my boys useful. Tell where the book is, and you go free. Otherwise I'm smashing this lantern on the floor. This place'll burn like a heap of leaves, and you'll burn with it. Then I'll take my men to the Bar Z Bar. We'll tear the house down, board for board and stone for stone, if we have to. Speak up—or we strike tonight!"

"You wouldn't keep a bargain for one minute," Helen said scornfully. "I'm still not talking!"

Taggart took another menacing step forward, raised the lantern. "Open the door, boys," he ordered. "Get ready to make a run—'cause I'm firing the place!"

Then Jim hurled the trap-door aside, stabbed his gun through the opening. "That's just about far enough, Taggart," he announced coldly. "I'm asking for an excuse to shoot you!"

Taggart turned startled eyes upward and his face twisted with rage. Helen had voiced a bitter truth when she had said Jim was the man's stumbling block. To find himself circumvented, once again, by the person he hated above all others, was too much for Black Jack Taggart. Far too angry to fully appreciate how near to death he stood, the Legion leader tossed caution aside. Like a striking snake, his arm swung upward as he hurled the lantern straight at Jim.

But the rage that goaded Taggart had made his aim erratic. The lantern smashed against the ceiling, blotted out, just as Jim fired. The gunflame revealed men crowding in retreat through the open door. Without waiting to fire again, Jim leaped to his feet, stepped through the opening. Gun in hand, he plunged downward into the room below.

CHAPTER XX

Murder Mark

STINGING pain lanced through the length of Sunny Jim Prince as his stockinged feet slapped against the floor. Had he been wearing his boots, he would have retained his balance but, instead, he stumbled and fell. At that moment he would have been at Taggart's mercy but the Legion leader hadn't lingered. Apparently Taggart's courage had been spent with his wrath for boots thudding along the upstairs runway told that all four men were in flight. To stay and exchange lead might have brought the entire town to trap them.

Scrambling to his feet, Jim let them

go. Taggart's words as he had threatened Helen had given him the germ of an idea for Taggart, unconsciously, had suggested the means by which the entire Legion could be trapped. With that idea already blossoming into a scheme, Jim could afford to let the four escape and, besides, his present concern was for Helen. Getting a match aglow, he found the girl, untied the knots holding her. When she sagged into his arms, he carried her along the runway and down the stairs, feeling his way carefully in the darkness.

The front door of the building swung wide, mute evidence that the four had gained the street. Jim peered cautiously through the doorway, half expecting a bullet from the shadows, but no sign or sound disturbed the night. It appeared the Legion men were already heading for Gunsight Pass for no one stopped them as Jim retrieved his boots and man and girl crossed the street.

Jim glanced toward the Tivoli. The Bar Z Bar had found Kid Chalmers for, in the sickly yellow glare of one of the saloon's unwashed windows, the riders were grouped around the youngster who swayed on unsteady feet. The cowboy's eyes shifted, rested on Helen who smiled wanly.

"Had enough for one day?" he asked.

"Just about," she replied. "You seem to have a habit of showing up at the right time."

"Like Taggart said, I'm a fool for luck," he reminded her. "Just now I'm achin' to try stretchin' my luck a little further, but it would be risky business."

"I know what you mean, Jim. You figure Taggart will carry out his threat, raid the ranch tonight with the entire Legion. And you're thinking it would be a splendid chance to bag them all."

It was the very thing that had shaped itself in his mind as he had crouched on the casino roof and listened to Taggart. He had prompted the organization of the law-abiding for just such a reason. Golden opportunity was at hand if he could locate Buzz Pritchett, have the sheriff call out the vigilantes. But in the meantime . . .

"It'll take awhile to get the ranchers together," Jim explained. "If the boys went back to the ranch, barricaded themselves inside the house, they could keep the Legion busy if them hellions showed up before help got there. But that stallin' job is apt to be dangerous. You'd better stay here in town, Helen."

Her hands crept to his shoulders. "Jim," she said softly, "I told you once that powder would burn in the Gunsight. I told you I didn't think you'd last long when it did. Because I was wrong, I've got to go back to the ranch tonight. I owe it to you . . . and to my dad. And, besides, I can't order my boys back to the ranch and hide in town myself."

The way she said it told Jim that argument would be useless. This was the fighting daughter of old Jeff Corrigan. Suddenly her arms were about his neck and he felt the lingering warmth of her lips against his. "I'll be riding fast and hard," Jim promised huskily. "Now it's my turn to tell you to take care of yourself."

HE tore himself away reluctantly, yet hastily. There was man's work to be done this night. The riders were heading down the street, Kid Chalmers with them. She would tell them what had transpired, get them back to the ranch, Jim knew. In the meantime, his chore was cut out for him. Leaving Helen to answer the excited questions of the cowboys, he started up the street. But before he reached the jail, thundering hoofs told him the Bar Z Bar was heading for home.

The jail building was dark, deserted looking. Jim pounded frantically at the door, tested it and found it locked. He peered through the windows but could see nothing. For the first time, it occurred to him that he did not know whether Pritchett slept in the building or had quarters elsewhere.

There was a place where he could get the information, though. Retracing his steps down the street, he turned into the livery stable and found Bub Little.

"How-do, pardner," the freckle-faced lad greeted him. "That letter come for you today." Searching through his pockets, the boy found and extended an envelope.

"I'm thanking you," Jim said. "Now I'm wanting another favor. Can you tell me where Buzz Pritchett is liable to be?"

"He's liable to be any place. Right now he's out to Lance Lowery's BX

spread. He was in town all afternoon but he got hisself a cayuse here this evening and said he aimed on lopin' out to Lowery's. Seems like he wanted to see Lance this mornin' but the gent wasn't home. Buzz figgered on makin' a call tonight and probably bunking there afterwards."

"Lowery's place," Jim ruminated. That was a spread just inside the pass, he remembered. Pritchett had mentioned the BK when he and Jim had been enlisting ranchers, stated his intention of calling on Lowery on his way back to town.

"Ain'tcha gonna open your letter?" Buzz asked pointedly.

"That's right," Jim returned absently and ran a thumb under the flap of the envelope. Inside, he found a small red notebook, the counterpart of the one that had been hidden in Jeff Corrigan's fireplace. There was also a brief letter scrawled above the signature of Dad Prince. Crouching beside Bub's lantern, Jim began to read.

"*Dear Son,*" it said. "*Got your letter and am sending you what you asked for. You was plumb right in guessing Tracy Varney gave me the notebook before he left for Gateway to get hisself killed. You've got a right to the book, son, but I'm asking you to watch your step. Showdown never brought anything but misery and death to them that hankered for it. . . .*"

There was more, but Jim's eyes skipped rapidly from paragraph to paragraph. Then he thumbed through the second red book. It supplemented Jeff Corrigan's, providing details about the section located by the first book. Jim's eyes widened with astonishment and he whistled softly as he read. The secret of lost Showdown was his.

At another time the amazing information might have thrilled him but there were other things of greater concern than a cursed mine that had cost countless lives. Helen would soon be at the ranch, waiting for him to show up with help which might be sorely needed.

"Bub," he said suddenly, "could you fork a cayuse and pack a note to Buzz Pritchett?"

"I'm a riding fool," Bub affirmed. "That chore is just the same as done."

Smiling, Jim tore a blank page from the notebook, borrowed a pencil and scribbled a note to the sheriff. The wording was brief but pointed—calculated to put Pritchett into the saddle, and quickly.

"I could use a lot of words telling you how important it is for this note to get to Pritchett," Jim said, "but I won't bother. All I'm saying is that you'll be the most important gent in the Gunsight tomorrow if you make the delivery.

"It's just a few minutes from the time I close the stable. After that I'll be on the trail just as quick as I glue some gear on a cayuse."

"I'm countin' on you," Jim said and gave the boy his hand. Then the cowboy headed up the street with purposeful strides. But doubt was dogging his footsteps. He was beginning to regret sending Helen ahead to the ranch and to wish he had made certain of getting hold of Pritchett. Still, there was yet another card to be played.

HE might have ridden to the BX himself but he reasoned it would be best to send the boy. If the sheriff were not at the Lowery spread, valuable time would have been wasted had Jim gone. If, on the other hand, the sheriff was at the BX, Bub Little, with the note, could acquaint him with the situation. In the meantime, Jim was free to seek other help.

The Tivoli was packed with men, but Jim avoided the saloon. Taggart had implied that all of his men were not yet in the valley which might mean that some of them were on the trail—or still in town. To enlist aid at the saloon might mean the spoiling of the entire plan.

So, instead, he headed for Quent Quayle's office and as he trudged along he told himself he would enlist the King of Gunsight by force, if necessary. Quayle had made it quite plain that he felt no obligation to Jim and he had also openly stated his intention of fighting the Legion in his own manner. Perhaps, with an opportunity to purge the Gunsight of the common foe, Quayle could be persuaded to call out his own forces. Then, if Pritchett were not located, the trap might be sprung anyway.

"Sorta have my eggs in two different

baskets,'' Jim mused.

It was near midnight and Quent Quayle would undoubtedly be in bed, but Jim aimed his footsteps toward the man's office. Both Quayle and Sing had been at the office on the night when the Legion had kidnapped the blind-man Jim had a hunch the two slept there.

The hardware and mercantile stores fronting the lower part of Quayle's office building were dark and deserted but a half-dozen horses crowded a hitch-rail before the place. Jim eyed them curiously. It seemed strange that horses would be waiting here, for this section of the street was isolated, deserted.

The thing that had become habit with him urged him to examine these horses but he told himself such a move would be futile. Besides, there was important work to be done. If he started looking at right hind hoofs he would be busy for the balance of the night since dozens of horses stood before the saloons. These half-dozen mounts were range cayuses, all with the exception of one, a fine gray gelding which looked like it might be Arabian stock. It was a magnificent animal, one that he could not recall ever seeing before.

He'd look at this one horse, he decided, and no more. The proof that Harris was a Legion man also proved that the foreman's story of a marked hoof was sheer nonsense.

Approaching the gelding, Jim wondered what had become of Bert Harris. The fourth man in Crousen's Casino had been Gallagher. Possibly Harris hadn't come to town with the others but had gone, instead, to the Legion's meeting place to represent the heads when the rank and file arrived.

Soothing the gelding with murmured words, Jim lifted the hoof, scratched a match aglow and made his examination. The match burned down, seared his fingers, but he did not feel the pain. In spite of his own disbelief in the story, he had found, at long last, a horse whose right hoof would leave a diamond-shaped imprint—the mark of murder!

Who owned this horse? Had someone left the mount here, gone up the street to one of the saloons whose own hitching rail was too crowded for accommodation at the time? Sing might know. If the Chinese were about, he'd ask Sing about the gelding.

Opening the door, Jim climbed the steep stairway, unmindful of the noise he made. His mind was whirling with new thoughts. This would be a complete night, indeed, if the Legion were rounded up and Jeff Corrigan's murderer identified and brought to justice as well.

No sliver of light showed beneath the door at the head of the stairs but, since the knob turned at his touch, Jim stepped inside a dark room and saw light filtering beneath another door, the door leading into Quayle's own office. He drummed his knuckles against the panel and the rasping voice of Quent Quayle invited him to enter.

CHAOS had reigned in this office when Jim had last been in the place but now the furniture was righted and Quent Quayle sat behind his desk, his hideous face more grotesque than ever in the chalky glare of a lantern hanging from the naked rafters overhead. But Jim didn't look at Quayle. Instead, he found himself staring into the black tunnel of a gun barrel. The weapon was in the hand of Black Jack Taggart who leaned against the wall, flanked by Jepson, Sabin and Gallagher.

''Now isn't this a surprise,'' Taggart purred. ''I thought you'd gone galloping out of town on my trail.''

Jim's astonished eyes wavered from Taggart to the blind-man, saw something that might have been a grin twisting the gash-like mouth. His first thought was that Taggart and his men had come to kidnap Quayle again but the grin told him different. It had been the King of Gunsight who had sent for Taggart! Quent Quayle, long the Legion's ardent foe, was openly consorting with the enemy. It didn't make sense.

''Step inside, Prince,'' Taggart invited, ''but don't forget to keep your hands straight up. You've always snooped into the Legion's affairs. Maybe you'd like to meet our latest recruit—Quent Quayle.''

''Quayle—in with the Legion?'' Jim asked incredulously.

''Just joined up tonight,'' Taggart replied. ''I don't mind telling you about it, Prince. This time there'll be no slip-up. We're gonna make damn sure you don't live to talk again!''

CHAPTER XXI

Masks Off!

ONE thought registered itself with deadly clearness upon Jim's mind as he slowly raised his hands. It would be up to Bub Little, and to Bub Little alone, to bring help to the Bar Z Bar. Jim had indeed blundered into a trap. The last men he had expected to find with Quayle were Legion men but the evidence of an alliance was before his eyes. The acceptance of that evidence meant the blasting of all hope for Quayle certainly couldn't be counted on to aid the ranch's fight.

This was Taggart's moment of triumph and the Legion leader was tasting it to the full. The gun lined on Jim had not wavered and Taggart's trigger finger was beginning to tense. The doomsday hush preceding death seemed to carry its message to every man in the room; even to Quent Quayle whose sightless eyes stared ahead.

"Easy, Black Jack," the blind-man rasped. "Don't forget I've got some say about things, now. It might be a damn foolish move to kill Prince."

"Why not?" Taggart snarled. "Ten minutes ago you were laying your cards on the table, telling us you figgered it best to join forces with us against this organization Buzz Pritchett has started. Well, Prince is the gent who put the bee in the sheriff's ear in the first place. He's the real organizer of the vigilantes."

"And maybe Prince was using Pritchett as a tool for his own work," Quayle countered. "I'm thinking this cowboy has been playing a game of his own all along. Don't be a damn fool, Taggart. You hate him because he's beat you at every turn. We can always use that kind of man. I aim to hear him talk."

Taggart shrugged in disgust. "Go ahead," he conceded ungraciously. "But I'm pulling his teeth, first."

Coming to Jim's side, he plucked the weapons from the cowboy's thighs with slim, gambler's hands, keeping his own gun on Jim all the while.

"Looks like I'm going to be the defendant in one of them Legion trials," Jim said. "Don't that entitle me to my guns — unloaded — same as Jake Shevlin?"

Taggart grinned, a tantalizing, wolfish grin. "Sure," he said and slipped the cartridges from the guns. "We'll do this thing right. And don't be forgetting what happened to Jake Shevlin in the end."

Jim thrust the unloaded guns back into their holsters, breathed easier. Quayle's interference had given him a little longer lease on life. Maybe his luck could be crowded a bit farther. His first astonishment at the situation had passed and his wits were working again. After all, it wasn't so surprising that Quayle had joined up with Taggart for Quayle would do anything to gain his own ends. Jim had sensed the blind-man's ruthlessness in his first association with the man. Now he had convincing proof.

"I take it I've got to make some sort of choice," he said. "Side you gents or chew your lead—is that it?"

"That's it," Quayle confirmed harshly. "I want these vigilantes of Pritchett's put out of business. Taggart wants the same thing. Between us we can do it—and we could use your help."

"And you were the gent who never sided with anybody," Jim mocked. "What do you figger you'll gain, Quayle? What are you after?"

"Showdown mine!" Quayle snapped.

Jim whistled softly. "This Showdown is gettin' to be a pie with a pile of fingers in it. How do you fit in?"

Quayle leaned forward, his face working. "I know where Showdown is!" he announced. "I've promised Taggart I'll tell him where he can find it—share the gold with him, the day we're rodding this valley completely. As long as I'm the only man who knows, I'm boss. I'm saying that if you side us against those damn vigilantes you helped start, you'll be counted in. That interests you, don't it?"

Jim's brow puckered. He was interested, but not in the manner Quayle might suppose. It was obvious Quayle wanted his help but the fact didn't spell release from peril. Men were merely pawns to the blind-man, pawns to play his own game. But Showdown? How

could Quayle possibly know the mine's location?

"It might be interestin'," Jim conceded easily, "if true. How do I know that you can point the trail to Showdown?"

"THAT'S what I'm wondering," Taggart suddenly growled. "You were going to prove it, just before this rannyhan come busting in."

Quayle snorted. "Fools, fools . . . all of you. You've been blinder than me, all along. They was three partners in the original mine, wasn't they . . ."

"You're wasting time," Taggart snapped impatiently. "We all know that story—Prince included. But Varney and Corrigan both died, right here in this section, and Sam Crousen cashed in his chips trying to pry himself out of Deer Lodge. Took advantage of an explosion in one of the workshops that blew a section out of the wall. He tried to climb through the hole and a second explosion wiped him out. They didn't find enough of him to bury."

"No?" Quayle sneered. "You always knew everything, Taggart. You wouldn't believe that Crousen did escape that night."

"Impossible," Taggart snorted. "I was in Deer Lodge at the time. So was Kurt and Bull. The prison guards were plenty satisfied Crousen was blown to bits."

"Foolish, too!" Quayle retorted and his voice rose shrilly. "I'm going to tell you the truth, see, 'cause when I'm finished you'll know I've got the key to Showdown and you'll be riding for me. Crousen did escape — badly wounded. He managed to walk from Deer Lodge to Helena but he crawled the last mile. Wound up in the middle of the night, more dead than alive, at a door in Chinatown. He was found, taken in . . ."

Jim began to sense an astounding truth and he shot a quick glance at Taggart for confirmation. The Legion leader's lean jaw was sagging, his small, black eyes large with amazement. And Bull Jepson and Kurt Sabin were staring, too; staring at the ghost of a man they had considered dead.

"The Chinaman who found Sam Crousen was Sing," Jim guessed aloud.

A hideous grin twisted the malformed face of Quent Quayle. "You're smart, Prince; too smart to die when you might be working for me. It was Sing. He brought me back to life but it took him six months to do it. He couldn't give me eyes but he healed me—left me this face. And the law's never guessed."

His laughter welled in the room, a mirthless cackle. In that instant Jim knew Sam Crousen's experience had twisted more than his face. The man was mad. Sing had once tried to warn Jim against Quayle and the meaning of that warning was clear now. "Can a man outwit the wolves and best the jackal at the same time," the Chinese had droned. Tonight the wolves and the jackal had united and trapped their common foe.

"And that's why you stayed in Gateway when you found the town," Jim ruminated. "That's why you were able to become King of Gunsight in such short order. You were getting gold from Showdown all the time."

"And why not?" Quayle snarled. "My mine up the mountain was a sham that never paid its own overhead. Showdown belonged to me—the last of the partners — even though I couldn't openly possess it for fear of the law and Jeff Corrigan."

"And so it was you that killed Jeff Corrigan," Jim went on relentlessly. "You're the man who rode the gelding out front. How did you do that, Quayle—and why?"

"Sing steadied the rifle for me," Quayle said, his voice gloating. "But it was me that pulled the trigger, savvy. I might have let Corrigan live—awhile longer, but I didn't dare. The Legion was prodding Jeff, trying to force him to go back to the mine. I was afraid he might—afraid he'd find signs that I'd been working it. That would have started Jeff to thinking. I couldn't risk having him guess that his old partner was alive—so I finished him."

"AND you cleared me of the pay-roll robbery because you didn't want Pritchett thinking about me and maybe investigating Jeff's murder," Jim said softly. "You wanted Pritchett to be satisfied the Legion had done the job, even if it didn't make sense for them to kill the man who knew the way to Showdown. I never could savvy why Jeff Corrigan

had to die."

"I'd have killed him anyway, sooner or later," Quayle rasped savagely. "Corrigan and Varney were a pair of fools—understand? It's because of them I haven't eyes today. I always hated them both—hated anything they had to do with. Before I'm through their very names will be stamped into the ground. Taggart figures on raiding the Bar Z Bar tonight. If I can reach my men in time, I'll order 'em to help him. I don't want anything left alive with the name or brand of Corrigan or Varney. Savvy!"

The blind-man's hand moved, jerked open a desk drawer. He plunged his fingers among the papers, groped until his touch identified the thing he sought. He held a tintype aloft. It was the picture Jim had found on the night when he had explored Quayle's desk in search of whiskey for Sing—the picture that had been so tantalizingly familiar.

"This is Tracy Varney's picture," the blind-man announced. "Here's the damn fool who wanted to blast a mountain, cover Showdown forever. Said it was doing more harm than good. Well, I killed him. And I'll sweep everything else out of my path that stands in my way. There's gold a-plenty for them that sides me. What's your answer, Prince?"

Jim, his eyes fastened on the tintype of Tracy Varney, didn't speak at once. He knew, now, why that picture had intrigued him for he had placed the man who resembled Tracy Varney. Slow wrath had burned within him as he had listened to Quayle's cold-blooded confession that had included murder in the past and killings yet to come. Recognition of the picture was fanning that wrath into a deadly flame, making him forget his cue was to stall for time. He knew he would be signing his death warrant if he said what he wanted to say but in spite of that fact the words tumbled from him involuntarily. They were quiet words, giving no hint of the hate that prompted them.

"Reckon maybe Taggart has told you how I come to be interested in Showdown in the first place," Jim said. "Seein' how it's a case of masks off tonight with everybody facing their cards, I'll do likewise. You see, Quayle, I was raised on the spread next to Varney's up in the Flathead country. I never knew Varney, of course, and I don't remember his wife. Folks say she died from a busted heart on account of what you did to him. But maybe some of you hombres have heard of Dad Prince of the Bent J. He's got a good name, has old Dad; a name anybody'd be proud to pack. I've been proud of it—but my real name happens to be Jim Varney, seein' as how I'm Tracy's son. Is that answer enough, Quayle?"

If there had been more to say it would have been lost in the wild bellow of hate and rage that came from Quent Quayle as he clawed for the shotgun on his desk. "Kill him! Kill him!" he ordered. "Gun him down!"

Taggart was quick to act and so were the three who flanked him—but not quick enough. They had all forgotten one thing—forgotten that the law of the Legion entitled a man to an unloaded gun. One of those guns flashed in Jim's hand and his arm swung viciously, smashing out the light. He had planned this move as he had spoken, counted on his amazing announcement to surprise them into carelessness for a single moment. As darkness descended, he leaped upward and crooked fingers closed on one of the rafters overhead.

ORANGE streaks stabbed viciously as he pulled himself out of peril's way but he knew his advantage could only last until they discovered his ruse—which would be a matter of moments.

For a solitary instant there was a lull in the gunfire and Jim utilized that instant. Lowering himself to arm's length, he swung his body pendulum-like and, as he gained momentum, released his fingers. Catapulting into the bunched men of the Legion who crowded the farther wall, he crashed to the floor, bringing two of them with him.

Now it was a fight where guns didn't count, for no man dared fire without endangering a friend. Taggart and Sabin were beneath Jim as savage curses quickly told him. Jepson and Gallagher floundered nearby. But another peril was more imminent, a peril Jim had been forced to risk. Quayle was still mouthing curses, damning the man who bore the name he hated. If Quayle, in his lust to kill, emptied the shotgun into their midst, it would mean death or mu-

tilation for all of them.

CHAPTER XXII

HARRIS SHOWS HIS HAND

MOONLIGHT slanting through a window, a tiny sliver of light, penciled across Quent Quayle's desk and left the rest of the room in shadows. Bull Jepson saw peril in that vagrant moonpath for his voice bawled out above the sound of struggling men.

"For gawd's sake, Quayle," the big man shouted hoarsely, "leave that scattergun lay or I'll put a slug intuh yuh!"

Jim heard and, breaking free of Taggart, he wrapped his arms around Kurt Sabin and, together, the two rolled across the floor. To the others they must have seemed like two men fighting blindly, carried aimlessly by the force of their struggle, but Jim had planned this move and each twist of the squirming bodies brought him nearer to the door. As they reached the threshold, he thrust Sabin beneath him. Then, wrenching free of the Legion man's grip, he leaped to his feet, dived through the doorway.

Lead sought him as he lurched across the outer room but his ruse had caught his foes unprepared. Whining bullets spattered into the walls but Jim was already careening down the stairs. He gained the street unscathed and thudded across it, scurrying into the deper shadows between buildings. There he paused, waited, panting with the exertion of the fight.

The wait wasn't long. Men poured from the doorway at the bottom of the stairs; Legion men, lead by Taggart. Dismayed and confused, they probed the shadows with uneasy eyes.

"Let's get tuh hell out of here, Boss," Jepson urged. "Prince'll have the whole town on our tails, pronto. Besides, I'm fed up on that gent upstairs. He always was a devil straight out of hell and he ain't changed any in that respect even if his face is different enough."

"Maybe you're right, Bull," Taggart conceded. "I'm betting Prince is fogging it to the Bar Z Bar right now, though. Let's get into the valley and start the men riding.

No dissenting voice was raised and the four bobbed around a corner. They must have hidden their horses between buildings for soon they were thundering down the street in the direction of Gunsight Pass. Jim watched them go. He was breathing easier but the anger that had goaded him into defying Quayle still fired him. Noiselessly, he crossed the street again, a silent shadow among shadows, and climbed the stairs.

The blind-man still sat at his desk, the shotgun within easy reach before him. The moonlight etched his hideous face as Jim stood framed in the doorway between the rooms. He took a cautious step forward but Quayle's other faculties were sharpened to make up for his sightlessness. In an instant the King's fingers were groping for the shotgun.

"Is that you, Sing?" he hissed.

Jim flung himself forward, jerked the shotgun from the man's closing fingers and hurled it across the room. "It's me . . . Jim Varney," he said, his tone metallic.

"Sing!" Quayle bawled. "Taggart! Grab him!"

"Taggart's high-tailed it into the Gunsight," Jim told him. "He's gone to raid the Bar Z Bar which is the only thing that's saving you right now. If I did business the way you do, Quayle, I'd kill you—blind or not. As it is, I'd drag you down to Pritchett's jail, but I can't waste the time. I've got to be riding to side someone whose smallest finger is worth more than your whole mangy carcass. I just come back to give you a couple things to think about.

"Tomorrow you'll be heading back to Deer Lodge—and I'll be out to Showdown with my partner, Helen Corrigan. We've got our dads' red books, Quayle, the ones that count. When you're waiting for the hang-noose, you can think about that. You can be remembering that the heirs of the two men you murdered got the mine in the end!"

FRENZY twisted the face of Quent Quayle, hideous evidence that the very thought implanted by Jim was torture to him. Smiling grimly, Jim backed to the doorway, dodged through the outer room and into the stairway. He almost collided with a slight form crouching

there. Instinctively his arm shot out but his seeking fingers closed on nothing as the other eluded him.

The voice of Sing spoke from the shadows. "We have no quarrel between us," he said in his monotonous tone.

"That's right," Jim agreed gruffly and hurried down the stairs.

In the saddle again and heading for Gunsight Pass, Jim thought about the Chinaman. Sing had steadied the rifle that had ended Jeff Corrigan's life but could he blame the servant for obeying the master? Sing, it appeared, was just another tool shaped for the use of Quent Quayle. And Sing, in his way, had tried to warn Jim, had urged him to flee the Gunsight. Had the Chinaman seen the picture of Tracy Varney, noted the resemblance between father and son, the resemblance that had eluded Jim, and guessed the truth?

It didn't matter now, Jim reflected, for he had dropped his own mask, admitted his true name. There had been no real point to keeping his identity a secret, anyway. Pride had urged him to prove himself to Helen Corrigan without revealing the truth for Helen would have unquestioningly accepted him as a friend had she known his name was Varney. And Jim knew he would have fought for her regardless of any kinship from the past.

The shadows of Gunsight Pass might hide a thousand lurking dangers so he rode with caution as he approached the defile. But peril had passed beyond, into the valley. Jim kept an eye peeled for Bub Little, reasoning the boy might not be far away if he had waited to close the livery stable before riding. The episode in Quayle's office had not taken a great deal of time and the boy might easily be in the vicinity. But Bub Little, apparently, was already at the BX for Jim did not meet him in the defile.

Soon the pass was a blotchy shadow maze behind and Jim was drumming across the moon-bathed floor of the valley toward the Bar Z Bar. Many times since he had come to the Gunsight country, he had asked for speed from Tumblebug and tonight he asked for it again. The horse responded gallantly as though sensing the importance of it all. The miles slid behind, one flowing into another, until the buildings of the ranch loomed ahead.

Then, with trail's end in sight, a sudden, terrifying thought sent the fingers of panic clawing at Jim's throat. Supposing Taggart and his men had overtaken Bub Little somewhere in the pass? Would Taggart, suspicious of every shadow, have wondered why the boy was riding alone by night and investigated? Jim tried to shake the thought away, told himself that it was he who was jumping at shadows. Still, there would be no harm in sending one of the Bar Z Bar riders after the sheriff too, he decided. Then, if any misfortune had overtaken the boy, there would be a second chance of getting help.

Only one light burned in the ranch house and no mounts were before the building. The riders had stripped gear from their horses, turned them into the corral to be safe from gunfire. Peace seemed to be sleeping over the Bar Z Bar and Jim wished he had sent the riders hurrying to rouse as many honest ranchers as possible rather than sending them here. But the success or failure of his original scheme had hinged on someone being at the ranch in the event the Legion struck before help arrived, so that had been out of the question.

Helen met him at the door when he strode across the porch and she led him to the living room. The crew of the Bar Z Bar was all there, busy with revolvers and rifles, preparing for a siege. But Jim scarcely noticed them. His eyes instantly rivetted upon a tall man who stood in the center of the room, a man who eyed him narrowly in return—Bert Harris.

It was the first time the two had stood face to face since the morning when Pritchett had arrested Jim for the payroll robbery. And Jim, positive now, that Harris was a traitor, felt a twinge of regret. He had liked this gray-eyed man once and he had wanted Harris to like him. That was part of the past. Harris' gaze was eloquent of animosity and Jim knew his own eyes were returning the challenge.

INSTINCTIVELY his hand dropped toward a holster. Harris' presence here, with the Legion riding against the ranch, could mean only one thing. They had sent the man to worm his way in-

side the house since he was the only one of the hooded hellions who could hope to do so. At that moment Jim damned himself for not having spoken to Helen long before, voiced his suspicions. Now they had a traitor in their midst.

Jim's move toward a gun was quick but Harris anticipated him. With his hand resting lightly on a gun-butt, the foreman spoke. "No need to start shooting—yet," he said scornfully. "I haven't told these folks the truth about you—but I'm going to now."

"That'll be plumb interesting," Jim retorted, his own voice edged with scorn. "Reckon everybody here would like to hear you spill your piece—all of it. We need Legion news."

"You talk pretty—and you talk fast," Harris jerked, "but you ain't foolin' anybody any longer, Prince. The first day you were on this spread I warned you I'd be watching you—and I told you what to expect if you made one wrong move. Since then, I happen to know you tried to sell out to the Legion, join them, when Taggart had your back to a wall. You'd be riding with them right now if Taggart had listened to you!"

"Maybe so," Jim flared. "But I don't reckon I'd have been promoted to the point where I was wearing one of them white stars—like you was."

His accusation jarred surprise across Harris' inscrutable face. "You know that!"

"I saw you early tonight when you lit a smoke—after lighting a beacon!"

Harris' right hand never moved from his gun, but his left hand moved downward as he half-crouched and groping fingers slid inside his boot top. When he straightened and extended his hand, palm upward, the badge of a United States Marshal glinted in the lamp light.

"This gives me the right to do things as I see fit," he snapped. "It even gives me the right to join the Legion."

Jim whistled softly. This had indeed been a night of surprises, a night when men chose to show the hands they played. Now Harris had followed suit and Jim, staring in amazement at the badge of his office, realized he had jumped to conclusions about Harris—just as Harris had misjudged him. Then swift doubt struck the cowboy.

"Did you have to tell the Legion about the red book?" he demanded. "Did you have top lay that up until they decided to raid the ranch? It's because of things they learned from you that they're riding tonight. A badge isn't any excuse for that!"

"A man in the rank and file of the Legion never learns anything. All he does is take orders. I needed a white star to get to the bottom of things. I earned that white star by passing on information they couldn't have gotten otherwise. Like that red book, for instance. I didn't count on them growing so desperate they'd raid the ranch. When I saw nothing would stop them, I sneaked away—came here to fight with the boys."

Jim was silent for a moment, his mind whirling with crowding thoughts.

"There's a couple things I don't savvy," he said at length. "When I first found you, you said a Legion man had cut you down. Later, when Pritchett came to arrest me, you accused Taggart of being in the Legion. They didn't give you a white star for that, did they?"

"I don't have to answer your questions, you sneaking traitor," Harris said evenly. "But I will, because you've about run your race, anyway. You heard Corrigan talk about Sam Crousen. Prison officials figgered he'd died at Deer Lodge, then new evidence made 'em believe he'd escaped. I was put on his trail—and it ended in Gateway. In order to smoke him out, I got a job with Jeff Corrigan. Since Jeff had been Crousen's partner, I figgered I might cut sign that way but it didn't work.

"WHEN the Legion started riding, I got interested, wrote my superiors and had myself put on the job against them. But it must have been Crousen who had me bushwhacked, granting he got an inkling of the truth somehow. I blamed the Legion because I wasn't ready to tip my hand to the local law—yet. As far as what I told Pritchett that day out here, it didn't spell anything, anyway. As a Bar Z Bar man I was expected to be suspicious of Taggart. All Gunsight knew the two ranches were at odds."

The riders of the Bar Z Bar had forgotten their guns and were listening in stupefied silence to the talk between the

two. Helen shared their amazement. She had gone pale, her eyes darting from one speaker to the other in dismay.

"That's my hand," Harris snapped. "You haven't said anything about yours. You don't need to. You told Taggart you had inside information about Showdown before you ever hit the Gunsight country. You come here to find the mine for yourself and you were trying to play all the ends against the middle. I told Jeff Corrigan I'd take care of his girl. I told you what to expect if you rode crooked. My badge has no claim against you, Prince, but as Jeff Corrigan's friend, I'm asking you to step outside and face me man to man!"

"No!" The word burst from Helen's tight lips. Instantly she was beside Jim, her arms around his neck. "You can't do this, Bert," she cried. "There's something wrong . . . terribly wrong. I know Jim has worked with us—fought with us—from the start. And—I love him, Bert."

Gently, Jim disengaged her arms, forced her aside so he could face Harris. In doing so, his gaze went beyond the man and through a window behind the foreman's back.

"Harris," Jim said quickly, "I believe your story. I could spill a few words and I'm thinking you'd believe mine. There's no time for that. We can use our guns—but not against each other. Look behind you, man!"

His extended arm drew all eyes toward the window. The moon was settling to the west but light remained—light enough to etch half a hundred horsemen in stark silhouette, hooded horsemen, rank upon rank like an avenging wave. Already those riders were spreading fanwise to hem them in. The Whispering Legion had come!

CHAPTER XXIII

Siege's End

WITH Jim's words ringing in the room, it was apparent that Helen and her crew had not been wasting time since their return to the ranch. A post had been assigned to each man and the riders leaped to their positions. Helen moved quickly too, blowing out the lamp with one motion, reaching for a revolver on the fireplace mantlepiece with another.

Furniture had been piled against the doors, shoved beside window sills. The men, dropping prone, huddled behind these crude barricades, ready to defend the house from every angle. Bert Harris alone stood hesitantly, his expression betraying his indecision. Obviously he hadn't accepted Jim's claim to loyalty. But when Jim, ignoring him, crouched on one knee before the living room window, Harris slowly sagged to a like position.

Then the voice of Black Jack Taggart reached them.

"Prince," he shouted. "You there? I want to parley."

Leaning, Jim smashed the windowpane with his gun barrel. "I'm here," he replied. "What do you want?"

Most of the hooded riders had disappeared but a score remained before the house, drawn up in a menacing line. Taggart, his hood thrown back, stepped his horse a few yards in advance, his whole attitude hinting that he commanded the situation.

"I want to know the way to Showdown," Taggart returned. "Speak up—and I'll call off my men. Otherwise this is the finish."

"Why don't you go to Quent Quayle?" Jim demanded wrathfully. "You know he can show you the trail. You're lying, Taggart. Quayle wants the Bar Z Bar rubbed out—and you aim to do the chore for him."

"Why should I split the gold with Quayle?" Taggart asked meaningly. "Give me the mine's location—and I'll let Quayle do his own fighting."

Helen crouched close to Jim. "I don't know what he means by his talk about Quayle," she whispered, "but it sounds like a regular Taggart double-cross."

"Maybe we ought to give him what he wants," Jim said from a corner of his mouth. "When I went to find . . ."

He was going to tell her he hadn't found Pritchett, that the trap they had planned for the Legion—grim irony—might be their own death trap. He never finished his words. Even as he started to explain, Helen impulsively

raised her gun. As it roared in the room, dust spurted a yard ahead of Taggart's horse.

"There's your answer, Black Jack," the girl shrilled. "The Bar Z Bar isn't bargaining with your stripe!"

Taggart jerked his horse, raised his arm in signal.

"Have it your way," he taunted. "The kid didn't get through with that note, Prince. We caught him in the pass and thought he acted funny when we questioned him. He's tied to your corral gate right now!"

He dropped his arm and the roar of rifles blasted out Jim's ejaculation of despair. Instantly the Legion men who were in view scurried to cover, Taggart with them, but they poured fire as they retreated. Whining lead signalled the rest of the band and the ranch house was raked from every side.

The Bar Z Bar returned the fire, every man working a trigger. Between gunshots, Jim jerked out his story to the girl and Harris.

". . . I counted on Quayle and Quayle had played turncoat," he concluded and, slamming lead at a moving shadow, saw the shadow claw at the sky and tumble. ". . . My last hope was that Bub would get through. We might have sent a man from the ranch but they acted too quick. Taggart must have had 'em bunched right here on the ranch."

"IT couldn't be helped," Helen murmured consolingly. "We were all so anxious to trap them, we never figured the trap might boomerang. But maybe we can hold them off until morning. I'm thinking they'll turn tail with the sun for fear of someone finding them here."

Jim nodded grimly, concentrated on his gun work. He could have told her the siege wouldn't last until dawn but he held his tongue. Taggart's men were trained for their work and the Legion had spread a ring around the house. As the hours wore by, that ring began to tighten. Seeking the cover of the cottonwoods in the yard, dodging from corral to outhouse, hugging each shadow tenaciously, the masked men were drawing nearer and nearer. Sprawled shadow shapes evidenced the price they paid for the ground they gained but the odds were over five-to-one and they could afford the loss.

Jim and Harris both tried constantly to order Helen to a position of safety on the floor but the girl ignored them, flitting from post to post, returning to the front room to report her findings. Bar Z Bar men had been wounded but the crew was holding its own.

Jim worked one revolver and then another, pausing only to reload or to probe the gloom for targets. Once his fingers strayed along his cartridge belt, found it empty.

"I'm out of shells," he whispered hoarsely and Bert Harris silently unbuckled his own belt, tossed it to the floor between them. No word passed between the two, but with the gesture, Jim knew Bert Harris no longer doubted him. With both men loading from the belt, they continued the fight but it was not very much later when old Maverick Meyers' voice hissed from the doorway leading to the rear of the house.

"Any shells to spare?" he asked. "Us rannyhans is gettin' plumb low."

Helen broke a fresh package, passed a fistfull of cartridges to the oldster. "There's a case of shells in the cellar beneath the kitchen," she said. "Better bring them up. Looks like we'll be needing them."

Maverick bobbed out of view and the roar of the fight went on. It had grown darker, the blackness before dawn. Time was marked by the whang of bullets, the hours pacing to the tune of gunshot. Then Kid Chalmers staggered into the front room, crouched beside Jim. Beneath the scarf Jim had bound about his head, the youngster's face loomed ghostly white in spite of powder smudges.

"Them bullets ain't in the cellar!" he gasped. "We looked. Slim's just remembered he packed 'em out to the bunnkhouse over a month ago!"

His whispered words rang like the trump of doom to his startled listeners. Bert Harris swore softly while Jim whistled. Helen stifled a moan, then darted to the rear of the house on flying feet. She was back almost instantly.

"It's true," she announced. "We haven't got fifty shells among us."

Jim's jaw tightened grimly and he shot a glance at Bert Harris. The foreman held his gun in his left hand, blood dripping from his right where a bullet

had ploughed a bloody furrow across it. Harris, unknotting his scarf to use as a bandage, nodded his despair. The game was just about up.

"You've been all through the house," Jim said to Helen. "Which part is catching the least hell?"

"Kid has been holding Dad's bedroom," she replied quickly. "It only has one window and it sets rather high. He told me they hadn't tossed lead through it a dozen times. Why?"

"We need shells," Jim replied grimly.

"Don't be a fool, man!" Harris barked in sudden understanding. "You'd never reach the bunkhouse. They'd cut you down before you were half way there!"

"It's gotta be chanced," Jim insisted quickly. "We can't fight without bullets."

"No, Jim," Helen blurted. "It's . . . it's crazy. Maybe if we try and give them the red book . . ."

HE ignored her, stepped toward the door. It was far too late to attempt to parley with the besiegers, he knew. Bert Harris rose to block his way and the marshal's left hand was exteended. "We're not going to let you do this," he said bluntly. "Just the same, I want to shake your hand. Reckon a gent can make a mistake."

Jim grinned wanly. "By the same reasoning, two gents can make two mistakes," he pointed and gripped Harris' unwounded hand.

Then he dodged quickly beneath the marshal's arm. He felt Helen's fingers pluck at his sleeve, heard her voice, low and terror-stricken, in his ear, but he dared not listen. Darting through the doorway, he plunged into the bedroom.

"Cover me!" he barked at startled Kid Chalmers and slid the window-pane upward. Tossing a leg over the sill, he dropped lightly to the ground.

Jeff Corrigan's bedroom faced the east and Jim saw color streaking the sky, heralding the coming dawn. In another hour there would be light but another hour would spell the ranch's doom. Already that first flush of morning over the mountains was enough to endanger his chances of reaching the bunkhouse but the die had been cast. He slid toward the rear of the house, expecting to hear the whine of searching lead at any moment; but Helen had been right when she had reported that the Legion had been ignoring that side of the house since the fight had started.

He had almost reached a corner when a man rounded the same corner, stepped into view. For a single second the fellow's surprise gave Jim an advantage for the man had obviously not expected to meet danger face to face. He stood paralyzed, hood thrown back, black eyes glittering—Black Jack Taggart.

In that moment, Jim had a strange, unexplainable feeling that destiny had arranged this night's doings, step by step, to bring Taggart and himself together on even standing. It was as though the battle raging around them was insignificant and the real battle lay between them—to be settled now. They were alone, isolated, it seemed, by their very hate for each other.

"You!" Taggart spat viciously and his gun-arm lashed upward. Two guns boomed as one. Jim, lurching sideways, heard the whistle of the bullet, felt blood drip from the lobe of his ear. He had been wounded but his own shot had counted for Black Jack Taggart was reeling like a drunken man, hands clutched against his chest.

Suddenly a dozen men spilled around the corner of the house—masked men. Jim fired into their packed midst, saw two of them stumble and fall and then they were upon him, an overwhelming horde. As they bore him to the ground he glimpsed Bert Harris' head poked from the bedroom window, saw a burst of Legion lead drive the marshal to cover.

They dragged Jim to the rear of the house to a strategic spot near the horse corral where they were safe from the lead of the besieged. Taggart had been carried to this safety too, and lay stretched upon the ground. A widening red stain marred the man's shirt front but life still remained. The Legion leader tried to raise himself but his strength was ebbing fast. A burly masked man dropped to one knee, cradled the dying man's head in his arms.

"We've got him, Black Jack," the man snarled and Jim recognized Bull Jepson's voice. "What do yuh want us

to do with him?"

The eyelids of the Legion leader fluttered weakly. "I'm done for," he said slowly. "You . . . you rod the Legion now, Bull. I'm cashing in . . . but before I go . . . I'm giving you one last order."

It sounded as though his words would go unfinished but he rallied once again. "Last order," he repeated. "Hang . . . hang that hombre to the closest cottonwood."

The words trailed away and Black Jack Taggart was dead. By gunflame and bloodshed he had sought to attain his end and by gunflame and bloodshed he had reached his own end. Taggart was dead but his hate lived after him. Bull Jepson lowered the body to the ground, stood erect, his eyes glaring savagely through the mask slits. "You heard what he said," he thundered at the milling men. "Get a rope, somebody!"

A HUGE cottonwood loomed near the horse corral. Jim was herded toward it. He saw the slight form of Bub Little lashed to the corral posts nearby, a handkerchief twisted about the boy's mouth as a gag. He tried to smile reassuringly in the youngster's direction even though men had left to keep the house covered and others had brought a rope, were fashioning a noose.

"Listen, Jepson," Jim jerked. "I know your word ain't any better than Taggart's ever was, and I'm not going to try and bargain for my life. Go on with your hanging—and be damned! But I know the trail to Showdown. If I tell you, will you promise to leave as soon as I'm dancing—let the house alone?"

Jepson cursed him sullenly but avarice began to gleam in the big man's eyes. It took him a long moment to answer.

"I got nothing again the Bar Z Bar," he replied, "but I'm carryin' out the boss' last order. You hang, savvy. But yuh tell me the way to Showdown and I'll lope afterwards—straight for the mine."

Jim's mouth had gone dry and he ran his tongue over his lips before speaking. He only half-believed Jepson would keep his word but it was worth trying. He, himself, was through. Jepson's made desire to get his hands on the gold might mean the saving of Helen and the others. That was the only thing that could count any longer.

"You won't believe me when I tell you," Jim said, " so I'll give you the proof first. Quent Quayle asked to join up with you tonight. Can you figger why Quayle fought you hombres from the first—then suddenly decided it was best to join you against Pritchett's vigilantes?"

"No—and I ain't tryin'," Jepson snarled. "Are yuh askin' riddles or are yuh tellin' me the way to Showdown?"

"There's a dozen tunnels leading back into the mountain from that cave you hombres were using," Jim explained. "Looks like you gents never bothered explorin' all them tunnels. The one pointing straight east leads to the shaft called Showdown! That's why Quayle was after you. He couldn't touch the gold so long as the Legion was using the cave and his chances got slimmer when you was chased out and Pritchett strung deputies around the cliff. You were sitting on top of Showdown all the time!"

Unbelief glinted in Jepson's eyes, changed to incredulity and then became understanding. He swore softly. "It fits," he murmured. "It all fits. Showdown—right in our cave!"

Twisting, he signaled his men. "Somebody snag that rope over a branch," he snapped. "Haul this hombre in the air. Quick! We got riding to do."

The rope whistled through the air—and Jim gasped in horror, not at his own impending doom but at a sight that met his eyes. Helen and Bert Harris were dashing around a corner of the house, heading straight for the cottonwood in spite of lead peppering about them. They were rushing to his rescue—a futile attempt that could only spell their own finish.

"Back!" Jim screamed. "Go back to the house . . ."

Then his words died unfinished as he saw something else. It was beyond belief, that new sight. It was the impossible actually happening. Rounding the house in a wild charge came a horde of riders, scattering the Legion men before them. Somehow, a miracle had taken place for the spreading light of the new day identified these men—honest ranch-

ers of the valley and rough-garbed miners from the payroll of Quent Quayle—riding together. And, leading the charge, a gun spurting in each hand, was Sheriff Buzz Pritchett.

CHAPTER XXIV

Lost Showdown

THE vast rangeland flooring Gunsight Valley shimmered beneath the noonday sun but far up on the slopes of mighty Sentinel the sweep of crowding branches canopied a tiny jutting ledge where a man and a girl sat. Like two pygmy spectators in a giant amphitheater, they looked down on the splendor beneath them, a scene of rare beauty like some pastoral picture from the Old Testament.

Currant bushes thronged riotously to fringe the ledge and flanking pine made the spot a cool recess. Sunny Jim Prince and Helen Corrigan had been here for almost an hour. Nearby, Tumblebug cropped contentedly along with the girl's little paint and a third horse, a pack animal loaded by Jim.

They had much to talk about, things that had to do with the early morning when the Legion, overwhelmed by the combined forces of the vigilantes re-enforced by Quayle's men, had surrendered to the last man. And there were other subjects too, things that had transpired in Quayle's office when two men had unmasked themselves, revealed their true identity.

Helen, shuddering, nestled closer to Jim. "I shall never forget that rope and the cottonwood and how near to death you were," she said. "It's wonderful to find you are Tracy Varney's son, and we're partners in Showdown. But mostly I'm glad Pritchett has packed his jail and the Whispering Legion is gone forever. It's the end of danger for you, Jim. And to think . . ."

"To think that Sing chose such a way to repay me," he finished for her. "I can easily understand Quayle, in his anger, ordering the Chink to call out all his men to help Taggart. Quayle threatened that very thing. But who'd have thought Sing would send them to help us instead—and then go and warn Pritchett, besides. Lucky for us Quayle's men were used to taking his orders from Sing. And lucky, too, I happened around in time to have Sing's life one night. Sort of bread cast upon waters, eh?"

"But the things you've told me about Quayle, or Crousen, or whatever his name is," she interjected. "He'll kill Sing for siding us!"

Jim chuckled. "I'm thinking Quayle's done all the killing he's going to do," he assured her. "I had quite a talk with Bert this morning, and just before we left, he was saddling up. He'll probably have that monster bagged before night. Then the King'll have to stand trial for your father's death. It will be the finish of the King of Gunsight . . . and the finish of the last of our enemies."

"We've won," the girl murmured softly, then her eyes widened at a sudden thought. "But Jim, you said you were bringing me up here to show me the thing we'd fought for—and won. Now you've just told me the whole story and said Showdown mine is in the cave down below."

Jim Varney didn't speak for awhile, his pleasant face serious, his eyes far away. Then his arm swept in a broad gesture that took in all of Gunsight Valley.

"There's a place to live, sweetheart," he said solemnly. "A peaceful place—now. Men can ride down there without watching their backs. And two people I know can work to build up a spread to what it used to be. The valley's been purged, Helen; made clean again. Isn't that what we were fighting for—you and me?"

It was the girl's turn to be silent but at last she spoke. "I see what you mean, Jim," she said softly. "You . . . you're thinking our dads were right—about Showdown."

"My dad figgered the thing out over twenty years ago," Jim went on gravely. "He wanted to dynamite the mountainside, bury the gold forever. That proposition was all right with Jeff Corrigan, too. They were big men, Helen—big enough to know gold doesn't count much, compared to a lot of things. I'm thinking the only thing that kept your dad from carrying out Tracy Varney's idea

was the fact you come into the picture. He was always afraid you might need the gold someday."

HIS hand closed gently on hers. "Dirk Hanley will have a nice chunk of money waiting for us at the Stockmen's Bank. It will start a new herd. And they's a lot of critters up on the Bent J, wearing a private brand—beef that Dad Prince gave to me. We could bring that stock here, start all over again."

" 'They's been good seasons and lean seasons'," Helen quoted, " 'but the Bar Z Bar has always managed to pull through.' "

And Jim, remembering the passing of Jeff Corrigan too, quoted in turn. " 'For over twenty years I've let lost Showdown stay lost. Leave it that way, Helen-girl'."

Then he grinned. " 'Course it would be right nice to be rich," he reflected. "We could probably own the valley in time. I'd set on the porch and watch a hundred riders doing our work for us. And I'd probably grow fat—through the middle and in the head."

"Jim!" the girl said suddenly. "That's why you brought that pack-horse along. I saw you prowling around the root-cellar behind the barn. You fetched dynamite!"

He stood erect, pointed. Not far away a huge boulder reared itself skyward. For centuries it had stood, a hoary sentinel, frowning down upon Gunsight Valley. "A stick of dynamite would start that rock rolling," Jim said. "It's just in the right position. I'm bettin' there'd be a landslide that would cover the face of the cliff below. Pritchett called in his deputies this morning and there's nothing to stop us—except ourselves."

"Then do it!" the girl urged, her eyes shining. "I . . . I want to start all over, Jim."

He kissed her once, then hurried to the pack-horse. In a moment he had dynamite, fuse and caps in his hands. With lightning fingers, he prepared the explosive, placed it in position at the base of the boulder. When the fuse started sputtering he rejoined Helen.

"We'd better back-track with the horses," he advised. "I ain't using much dynamite but I don't want 'em to stampede down the mountain."

They lead the mounts to a safe distance, threading through an almost-level timbered space, one of the terraces on the side of Sentinel. There they waited but the wait was not long. A muted roar split the air and the boulder quivered, leaped like a live thing. Careening down the mountainside, it gathered other boulders in its travel, started loose shale to sliding. Dust rose as a miniature avalanche roared down the slope, gathering fresh fury until it ceased to be a minature avalanche and became, instead, a real one.

Jim held the girl close as they watched. Once she looked up at him. "Sorry?" she whispered.

"There goes my chance of being a cattle baron," Jim said ruefully but his grin belied his tone. "Reckon I'll have to work for my keep."

The destruction was complete. Far below, tiny dust clouds eddied upward, were caught and whirled away. And the two knew, beyond a question of doubt, that tons of rock and earth and uprooted timber were heaped upon the cliff. Lost Showdown was lost forever. And with the sealing of the mine, Jim felt strangely light-hearted as though bloody responsibility had been lifted from his shoulders.

As if by spoken agreement, the two silently mounted, found the trail and began to pick their way downward.

Once he caught Helen smiling. "I was thinking about you and Bert Harris," she explained. "How queer that each of you judged the other wrongly. Why didn't you ever speak of that, Jim?"

"Wa-al," he said hesitantly, "I knew you set a heap of store in him . . . thought maybe you might even be in love with him. I . . ."

"You didn't want to hurt me," she interjected. "Thanks for that, Jim. I did think a lot of Bert—still do. But he's old enough to be my father. I—"

"Quiet!" Jim hissed.

THE going had become easier as they neared the bottom of Sentinel but here the timber was even thicker, the way choked by bushes and trees so the trail wended through a leafy tunnel. Nearby, someone was moving, screened by a turn

of the trail. Instinctively, Jim's hand dropped to a gun.

Along the trail came a burro, bearing a little yellow man upon its back. Lifting slanting eyes to them, the man stopped his mount in the middle of the trail, bowed.

"Sing," Jim acknowledged and nodded in turn. "I didn't expect to find you here, but I'm glad I did. They's things to be said."

"My humble ears await eagerly," Sing countered impassively.

"Once you steadied a rifle barrel so a certain hombre could shoot," Jim said evenly. "We're forgettin' that, Sing. Last night you took your life in your hands to help me. We won't be forgettin' that. I'm reckoning Miss Corrigan, here, will want to invite you to stay at the Bar Z Bar until Quayle is captured. He'll probably kill you if he catches you."

"I have seen my master," Sing said gravely. "I went to him this morning, like an honorable man, to meet the fate I merited. But it was not written so. His wrath was like the thunder but his hate for you was greater than his wrath. He spared me, that I might serve him again. I have served him long and well —a service of fear. I will serve him no longer . . ."

A wrinkled yellow hand crept to a bulging blouse pocket. "Within reposes the yellow stuff that goads men to bloodshed and madness," the Chinese said monotonously. "These are nuggets from Showdown mine. I took only enough to serve my needs—to return me to the land of my ancestor. I go there now."

"You've been to Showdown!" Jim ejaculated. "Today!"

Sing nodded gravely. "I left my master there. It was his wish. Gold was his god and he reasoned gold would be the god of all others. He thought that before the sun stood high, you and your beautiful lady would come to Showdown to worship that god. He was waiting there for you—with the gun that spreads destruction."

"He wanted to kill us before he was captured," Jim soliloquized. "He'd figgered we'd rush to the mine and he was waiting—to cut us down with the shotgun. *In Showdown!*"

Helen's face was ashy gray. Suddenly she sobbed, buried her face in her hands.

"The very god he worshipped destroyed him," Sing said. "I left the mine just before the skies rained death. My master has ascended to the dragon's throne. It was so written."

"Buried alive!" Jim whispered and threw a consoling arm about the girl. "We didn't plan it that way," he reminded her gently. "We wouldn't have wanted that . . . even for him. He brought it upon himself."

Sing nodded, prodded his burrow and moved along the trail. In silence they watched him until he disappeared from sight—a little Chinaman upon a burro, yet somehow a dignified figure.

THEN the two moved along the trail again, riding in silence, each busy with his own thought. Just retribution had been visited upon Quent Quayle, Jim decided. Through all the misspent years of his life, the man had been goaded only by greed, and sudden death had been his tool. Now death had overtaken him, burying him with the gold he had killed to hold.

Jim's spirits rose as he thought about it. Now, indeed, Gunsight Valley was purged of the last of the carrion that had defiled it. He cast a glance at the girl, saw that the horror had ebbed from her face.

"You were speaking of Bert Harris awhile back," he reminded her and his voice was cheerful again. "I'm thinking Bert will make a mighty poor best man. With that bad hand of his, he's plumb liable to fumble the ring. Maybe—now this is just an idea—we could get a soap box for Bub Little to stand on and let him do the job at the wedding. What do you think?"

"Wedding," she murmured. "Why, I don't know what you're saying, Jim."

But her hand, seeking his, told him she did understand. The horses moved slowly along the trail. Behind them the mighty offshoots of the Montana Rockies loomed, the jagged peaks stabbing the sky. Before them lay the open miles of Gunsight Valley, peaceful beneath the sun. Hand in hand, the girl and the man faced forward and their faces mirrored contentment, for they were heading home. . . .

Six-Guns Appeal the Verdict

By ROD PATTERSON

Author of "The Boomerang Brand Pays Off," etc.

Trouble would ride Joe Varine long after the law gave him his gun and hat back, and Joe would hang both up in boothill before he'd redeem them beyond a hot-lead barricade!

THE girl, tight-lipped and flushed, stepped quickly down from the witness box. For ten minutes her voice, a faint, frightened melody, had filled the crowded courtroom. Now, under the bleak gaze of Judge Mort Houser, a silence that was almost palpable flowed out across the close-packed room; it spread even into the front corridor where a deputy sheriff wrestled single-handedly to hold back the milling crush of cattlemen who had failed at the last moment to get in. It was all over—all over but the verdict of the jury. And there wasn't a man in Latigo Springs who didn't know now what that verdict was going to be. Molly Varine's testimony had taken care of that.

Olin flung himself forward again in another attempt to get that gun!

For a moment the taut silence held, while the whole courtroom seemed to be pulsating with pent-up rage and disappointment. Then, like a torrent bursting through a crumbling dam, a flood of voices washed out in a slowly building roar across the sultry chamber. One voice, shrill and high-pitched, rapped out above the rest. "By God, that woman's a liar!"

Hunched forward over his high bench, old Judge Houser hammered for order, the sharp strokes of his gavel riding the din like pistol shots. Sheriff Ed Torrey got up in his slow, unhurried way and walked across to where the prisoner sat in the low-railed dock. Joe Varine slouched in his chair, unmoved and taciturn, his blue-black hair, brushed smoothly back from his nar-

row forehead, glinting like gun metal in the sunlight.

The jury filed soberly out through the door behind the bar of justice. . . . In fifteen minutes they returned and the foreman's nasal voice droned across the silence. Joe Varine was a free man —found not guilty by a jury of his peers of the murder of Charlie Conners, boss of the Big Bit Ranch.

But outside, in the dusty square of Latigo Springs, the courtroom was spilling its murmurous crowd into the thin October sunshine. Over near Supple's Saddle Shop, two hard-eyed cowboys were talking in low, tense voices. "Well, that's what we git for lettin' the law handle a coyote," said Billy Zwig, the Big Bit wagon boss. "I told yuh we should'a' stretched his damn neck when we had the chance."

Sam Barr said: "How'd we savvy his wife was gonna lie like that?" He spit disgustedly into the dust. "Olin Telford's takin' him to Timberline, Phil says. That's only two jumps to the Soccoro line. Well,"—his voice thinned down—"he ain't got there yet."

Over by the cast-iron water trough in front of the Quaker Church, two other men talked and carefully watched the courthouse door. One was tall, with a long horse-like face and greenish eyes. The other, short and swarthy, had hair long and stringy and black, like an Indian's.

The tall one said, "I figured when they found that ivory-handled hog-leg o' his, he'd swing. One time a wife come in handy."

The short man growled. "Yeah, but he ain't outa this yet. They may be some shootin', and that's where me and you'll come in."

"Hell!' the big man said. "If I only savvied where Joe has got that *dinero,* I'd hit for the hills like a shot-at lobo!"

Back in the courthouse, a bailiff was taking Joe Varine down the hall way from the courtroom. They stopped short in front of an office door. "In there, Varine," the bailiff said curtly. "Your gun and hat's in there."

Joe Varine's thin lips stretched back. "Let go my arm," he said sullenly. "I can take care of myself." He jerked his elbow away and went in the office. With the door half shut behind him, he stiffened. The familiar bulk of Deputy Sheriff Olin Telford was sprawled uncomfortably in an undersized arm chair.

A hard laugh cracked out of Telford. "Well, Joe," he said, "you squeezed out again, I see."

"What are you doin' here, Olin?" There was a touch of apprehension in Varine's smooth voice.

"What's it look like?" Olin Telford propped a boot on his left knee. "I ain't waitin' for the Boulder Stage, that's sure."

Varine kept on frowning. "Your loop's run out, Olin," he said, confidence returning. "Nobody's lookin' for me."

"No?"

"I was found not guilty. And I reckon it'll stick, too. That puts me right back where I started."

"Yeah." The deputy's voice was thin. "It puts you back where you started, all right. Only you'd better watch out for the Big Bit. Over there they still think you bushwhacked Charlie Conners and stole that three thousand dollars. So do I."

"It won't do 'em no good to figure that way. I got friends."

"So has the Big Bit, Joe."

VARINE'S black eyes glittered. He said hoarsely, "They ain't gonna start a ruckus, are they, Olin?"

"You askin' me, Joe? How would I know?" Telford heaved his big frame upright out of his chair. "Well," he said, "Judge Houser says you can have your gun and a chance to keep on livin' —till we get to Timberline, anyways."

Varine got out his makings and began to roll a cigaret. His long, slim fingers were not altogether steady. "Reckon I can take care of myself," he said. "Besides, Haze Hartley and Cochise're out there waitin' somewheres."

"Your pardners ain't gonna give you much help, Joe. I'm thinkin' them two gun-slingers are gonna be plumb busy takin' care of themselves." Olin Telford reached out for the gun belt dangling from a wall peg behind him. He removed the blue-steel Colt from the leather, jacked out the cartridges, and handed gun and belt to the black-haired man. Varine whipped the belt around his hips, drew the silver buckle up tight against his flat stomach.

Olin said, "So you can take care of yourself? When did you learn how? When we was kids, you never could—"

"All right. But I'm tellin' you I don't want no damned lawman trailin' me around. Leastways not you, Olin."

Olin laughed. "The Judge figures different, Joe. And the hell of it is, he just told me it's worth my job to see you get outa the state all in one piece. Funny, ain't it?

"I'm leavin' this afternoon. I don't need you."

"Sure, you're goin' this afternoon. And I'm stickin' right with you till we hit Timberline. I got your horse outside." Telford handed Varine his hat, went on: "By grab, I gotta laugh when I think of it. Remember how I used to save your hide in the old days, Joe? It sure was a caution the way I used to knock hell outa those other kids after you'd pulled one of your sneakin' little tricks on 'em. Slim and Blackie. They was always gonna smash you till I took your part. Me, I figured you never done no wrong because you was so damned handy with that smooth tongue of yours. Yeah, this sure is gonna seem like old times, Joe."

The pupils of Varine's eyes shrank to pinpricks. "I don't have to listen to that kind of talk."

Quietly, Olin Telford went on: "In them days, I stuck up for you because I was sorry for you. Now it's my job. The Judge says, 'See that the little varmint stays alive till he gets to Timberline. If anything happens to his hide on our side of the line, it'll look bad for me and Ed Torrey—and it'll *be* bad for you.'

" 'All right,' I says, 'but if the Big Bit boys managed to perforate Joe's carcass between here and there, it seems to me t'would be an act of God, and the law couldn't do nothin'. The Judge says, 'Maybe, but the voters of Sundown County have been raisin' ruckshins lately sayin' we ain't roddin' the law like we should. So we gotta go and buck God, I guess.' That's the way it is, Joe, so you better be nice about it."

All the color had drained out of Joe Varine's face, leaving his mouth a stark, bitter line. He wasn't handsome now. He was ugly—and dangerous. "Olin," he snarled, "it's a trick! You want to see me get plugged!"

For a moment they faced each other, Telford's broad, brown face broken by a stiff grin, Varine's lips tight and drawn in, his eyes agate-hard. Then Varine stepped forward. "You're mighty sharp, Olin," he said, "but it ain't gonna get you nowheres. Molly's stickin' with me. She'll do like I tell her—go wherever I go."

Olin shrugged. "Maybe," he said. "And maybe not." After a moment, he said, "She'll hate admittin' she was wrong, I know that. But she's gonna be sorry for what she's done."

Blood stormed up into Varine's dark face. He burst out, "You've always wanted Molly—I've savvied that ever since I married her! And now, by God, you're figurin' to get her after I've—"

Olin's big hand reached out and be-

came a fist with Joe Varine's coat collar twisted up inside of it. "You got the wrong idea about lawmen, Joe," he said quietly. "When a deputy's on the job, that's all he thinks about." The grip on Varine's collar loosened, and Olin was smiling again. "A good deputy like me, anyways," he finished.

Varine smoothed out his coat collar. Hate flared in his black eyes. "Keep on bein' a good lawman, then," he said in a dead, flat tone.

"Meanin' what?"

Varine pulled his shoulders up, let them fall again. "Judge Houser's give you the job of escortin' me to the border. I can't help that. But I'm warnin' you to keep your hands off Molly."

Olin pulled the brim of his Stetson down low over his eyes. "Ready, Joe? Let me go first. You hang around the side door till I give you the word to come."

OUTSIDE the courthouse a biting wind whirled little dust-puffs out across the square; it rattled the courthouse windows, whined through the bare limbs of the cottonwoods that lined the board walks. Deputy Telford stepped through the side door and moved toward the two horses tied to an iron ring against the building. His glance touched the little group of riders that stood hugged up to the courthouse wall, silent and as patiently waiting as their ponies, lined along the tie rail out in front.

Across the dusty street, in the little church yard cemetery, a new headstone gleamed somberly among its dingy neighbors. A mound of freshly turned earth marked the last resting place of Charlie Conners, an honest man who had died with a bullet in his back.

Trouble had ridden Olin Telford all his life; it had gentled him, so that his square, bronzed face was almost impassive as he looked across to the waiting cowboys. He called: "Boys, you're all my friends, I ain't forgettin' that. But I gotta warn the Big Bit and any other outfit that tries to rod the law in their own way, that it won't work. I got a job to do, and I aim to do it. And the first man that tries to shuck an iron will be in for a spell of trouble. Just remember that."

A raw-boned cowpoke spoke up. "Olin, we savvy you got your duty to do. Just the same, Varine killed our boss and we don't figure to let the dirty snake git away on us."

Olin said, "All right, Billy, but look sharp, all of you, before you start anything." He stepped quickly into the saddle of his roan, then called, "Okay, Joe; come on out."

The side door swung back and Joe Varine came along the walk, swaggering a little. With his boot toe lifted to the stirrup of his pinto, he slanted an insolent glance at the Big Bit riders. And that was the moment that two men, heavy with gun-iron, strolled around the corner from the front of the courthouse. Olin recognized the tall one as Haze Hartley; the short, dark one as Cochise, the gunman from Chickesaw. Both were rustlers and friends of Joe Varine.

Varine swung up into the saddle and, utterly indifferent to the tense scene at his back, said: "We'll ride over to my place first, Olin. I gotta pick up some stuff—and Molly."

Then he put his pinto sharply around and with Olin Telford right behind him, rode into the square and wheeled southward along the desert trail. Half an hour later they reined up in a little clearing on the sandy banks of Buck Hook Creek. In front of them stood a small clapboard shack with a tin roof and a shedlike lean-to.

Varine stepped down, his voice low and bitter in the silence. "Maybe this ain't gonna be as much fun as you figured, Olin."

Olin said: "Well, she married you, Joe. Maybe it's what she wanted." He swung out of the kack.

Varine said: "You'll find out," and walked stiffly across to the front door of the shack. Then they were in the cool half-light of the little living room. Olin's heart was speeding up a bit, now. He threw his hat on the cow-hide lounge in the corner and crossed to where a mirror hung against the faded wall paper.

He straightened his neck-piece and smoothed down his tousled, sandy hair. Hanging back deliberately behind the draperies at the dining room door, he let Varine go in first. He wanted to see her face before she saw him. That way, maybe he could tell before she had time to pretend.

She was facing the door, sitting in a straight-backed chair with her eyes closed. Hearing footfalls she gave a start and jumped up. Olin watched her from the door, saw her startlingly blue eyes meet Joe's in quick alarm. They weren't the eyes he remembered: quick and eager, with just a hint of mischievousness in them. Something had gone out of them; something that might never come back. Her face, he saw, was a little thin, a little drawn. And now, seeing her like this for the first time in five years, it was hard for him to realize that other Molly, the Molly he had known when they were kids. He could remember, all at once, how it had felt when he'd kissed her that first time —and all the other times, too. Those kisses had done something to him. And her arms, so tight around his shoulders, so possessive, it had seemed, then.

Now, Molly was standing here, her shoulders slim and straight in a red silk blouse, her eyes burning brightly—but with a strange unnatural brightness—as she looked at her husband.

She said at last, listlessly: "Well, I did it, Joe. And now—now I wish I was dead!" Listening to those words, Olin felt a sharp, dry ache in his throat. It was something in her voice. "I told them what you wanted me to say," she went on defensively, "and I've packed our war bags, like you said. Joe; why are you looking at me like that?"

Varine said curtly, "I got company," and then Olin stepped through the door.

She stiffened when she saw him, then moved a pace forward and stopped. "Olin!" she cried. "Joe!" Her face was white. "What's wrong—"

"Joe's all right," Olin broke in gruffly. "He's all set—or will be soon's I get him to Timberline." He held out his hand. "I'm glad to see you, Molly."

THEIR hands met and Olin held hers in a tight grip until her eyes, darting fearfully to Varine's and back, begged him to let go. "I—I didn't expect to see you, Olin," she said with a little laugh. "It's been so—so long since—"

"Five years," Olin said shortly. He pulled his eyes away from her face and looked around the room. Joe Varine stood there beside them, watching out of the edges of his little black eyes.

"Joe tells me you're riding out with him," Olin said.

"Yes." She answered faintly.

"Soccoro's no range for a woman." Olin's tone was blunt.

"Nobody asked you," Varine put in quickly.

Olin kept his glance on the girl. "Soccoro's no place for you, Molly," he repeated doggedly.

Varine didn't give her a chance to reply. "By God, Olin, I told you—"

"Shut up, Joe!" There was the thrust of steel in Olin's voice. "Do you really want to go with Joe, Molly?"

For a moment they stood there, the three of them close together, and the air seemed to be vibrating. And then Olin's face was somber. He said: "Molly, why in God's name did you lie

to that jury?"

Varine thrust his darkly flushed face forward, his eyes deadly as an angry rattler's. But before he could speak, Olin quietly added: "Joe ain't worth it, Molly."

The girl's face was deathly white. She whispered, "Joe told me if I didn't —didn't do like he said, he'd make—"

"Shut up!" Varine lunged toward his wife, but Olin swept out an arm that held him back.

The deputy said: "Go ahead, Molly."

She started to speak, then suddenly she said, "Oh, never mind," and turned toward the kitchen lean-to. "I'll see about something to eat."

When she was gone, Olin ran his gaze around the room, finally putting it on a brand new tin-type propped up on the top shelf of a what-not in the corner. He went over and took the tin-type in his hands, the interest in his eyes sharpening. It was a picture of Joe Varine—an insolent, almost belligerent pose that showed the slightly lowered head, the narrowed eyes. Joe was flashy and handsome with plenty of attraction for a woman, Olin had to admit that. Five years ago he'd found that out, to his grief. A newly appointed deputy sheriff fresh off the round-up trail hadn't been able to keep his head in an argument with a girl. He'd lost out against the sleek ways of Joe Varine.

Olin studied the tin-type carefully, gave a start of surprise. Then he looked across the room to Varine's gun belt. The gun that jutted at his thigh was a Colt. But the handle was black bone. Not ivory, like the one Joe was wearing in the picture. Olin jabbed a thumb at the gun in the tin-type. "This here's the iron we found at Conners' line shack," he said.

From across the room, Varine said thinly: "That won't get you nowheres. There's plenty ivory-butted guns on this range."

Olin slammed the tin-type back on the shelf, moved swiftly across the room to Joe Varine. "What have you done to Molly?" he demanded abruptly.

"Why, she looks all right to me." Varine's eyes were glittering strangely.

"What have you done to her, Joe?"

Varine was calm now, maddeningly calm. "She's like a filly that's been broke to saddle, Olin. Some of the fire gone. That's all."

Olin lifted a tightly-balled fist. The dark man fell back a pace, jerking up his guard instinctively. "Don't forget, Olin. The Judge would be plumb riled if anything happened to me. Ed Torrey, too." Olin's fingers straightened, his hand dropped back. Varine laughed.

Molly was standing in the kitchen door. She said, "The beans are warming," and started to turn away. Varine brushed past Olin and went quickly to her. "We'll just have a look at that blanket roll of mine. We might need it when we hit Timberline."

Her eyes moved reluctantly to his. "It's all right. I took care of everything."

Varine smiled at her coldly. "We'll have another squint at it, just the same," he said shortly. "Olin won't mind, will you, Olin?" He turned, pushing his wife ahead of him.

Olin rolled a cigarette. The palms of his hands were moist and sticky and he rubbed them together. He went back into the living room and pushed the curtains aside at the front window for a look into the yard. Nothing stirred in the yard or on the trail. He returned to the dining room, and smoked two cigarettes before Molly and Varine came back. Varine was grinning as though something funny had just happened. "Put on the beans," he said to the girl, and dropped the war bags and the bed roll on the floor near the living room door. "Molly and me have got to eat fast," he said. "Haze and Cochise'll

be here in a few minutes."

Olin frowned. He tapped the butt of his six-gun. "Better tell your pardners to keep on driftin', Joe. If the Big Bit starts any gun play I don't aim to side them two coyotes. Bad enough I gotta save your hide."

"They're handy with guns," Varine defended. "In case you needed any help."

"Tell 'em to stay outa my sight."

THEY sat down to beans and bacon, not talking. Olin kept watching the girl across the table—saw how she didn't eat or even pretend to; how her blue eyes lifted quickly to his and fell again; how her lips parted for words that never came.

Presently Joe Varine pushed back from the table. Molly got up and started for the kitchen to get the coffee. Olin Telford rose. "I'll help you," he said.

"She don't need no help!" Varine spoke sharply, his eyes cold against the deputy's.

The girl stood looking from one to the other. She turned away, then quickly turned back again, and in that moment a new look had come into her eyes. "He won't let us talk together, Olin," she said tightly.

Varine put his knuckles on the table, leaning over it. "I'd shut that big mouth of yours if I was you, Molly," he shot at her.

Olin moved around the table and took her hand. "Go ahead and talk, Molly. It won't make no difference, him bein' here."

For a moment, the girl hesitated.

Across the table, Varine sucked in a sharp breath. Then his hand pitched downward toward his Colt. Olin Telford said, "It ain't loaded, Joe. Remember?" Then to the girl: "Go ahead, Molly."

Her smile came bravely and she held tighter to his hand. "I tried to go through with it, Olin," she whispered. "I'm proud, I guess—just plain stubborn proud."

"I'm just as bad, Molly. I should 'a' tried to find you. But after you ran off on me that day—"

"I was wrong, Olin! Terribly wrong! And when I think of that childish quarrel we had, I could—"

Olin nodded. "Just a pair of proddy kids," he said huskily, "messin' things up for ourselves."

Varine lurched to his feet with an oath. "Better talk fast, Olin! We're leavin' in five minutes and this'll be your last chance."

Olin Telford didn't turn. He was looking steadily at Molly, remembering things he had thought could be forgotten, things, he knew now, that never could be. "Why did you lie to the jury, Molly?"

"I was afraid, Olin."

"If he's laid a hand on you—"

"No, not that. But it's been five years of hell. Riding the backtrails with those two friends of Joe's. Hiding out sometimes. Having money you were afraid to spend for fear that—" Her voice caught sharply.

"But the jury, Molly. What—"

Fear showed suddenly in her eyes. She said, "Joe told me to do it—said if I didn't he'd—he'd make Haze and Cochise kill you!"

The muscles of Olin's jaw knotted. "But why did you stay with 'em?"

"We were married, Olin. It's supposed to mean something. And I thought that maybe—well, I thought he might change. But now—"

"Now you can't stand any more." Olin's eyes burned with a slow flame. He turned abruptly. Varine's eyelids crept slowly together; his right hand was strained whitely on the handle of his gun. "She's through with you, Joe," Olin said thinly. "I'm takin' you to

the border—but I'm takin' you alone."

Varine's lips parted, showing his white, even teeth. And that was the moment that Molly screamed, a high, piercing outcry. Olin's hand whipped down to his gun and he started to turn. Even after he felt the pressure at the small of his back he tried to turn. Someone in back of him stepped closer. He could feel hot breath pelting the nape of his neck. A voice close to his ear rasped, "H'ist 'em, neighbor!"

Olin pushed his hands up to the level of his shoulders. He was looking straight into Molly's horrified eyes. "Stay back," he said harshly. "Keep out of it, Molly."

Joe Varine came around the table in long, reaching strides. He pushed the girl aside and stood in front of Olin. Hate ran a rolling snarl across his lips. "Keep that gun on him, Haze!" he snapped.

Olin felt the gun lifted from the holster at his thigh. With its familiar weight gone, it seemed as if a part of his body was missing. Then the man behind him pulled the handcuffs out of his pocket. After that, they turned him around and marched him over against the wall. He tried to keep a grip on himself, to think clearly. He heard them in back of him; heard Varine's thin voice giving orders.

"Keep him covered, Haze," Varine said. "I'll go out and get Cochise."

Facing the wall, Olin said: "You won't get away with it, Joe."

"Who says I won't? You ain't gonna stop me."

Olin moistened his lips. "You can't kidnap Molly—even if she is your wife."

"See, Haze?" Varine spoke with heavy irony. "See what a good lawman Olin is? He even wants to take care of my wife for me."

Olin could hear Varine walking through the house, heard him call, "Cochise! In here!" then come back. He turned his head and saw Haze Hartley standing to one side, his greenish eyes glittering with savage amusement. The outlaw had Olin's Colt in one hand, his own in the other. He wasn't looking at Olin; his obsidian eyes were on the girl. Molly's voice lifted. "Joe, you're not going to—"

THE deputy swung abruptly around. He would have lunged at Varine without regard for Hartley's gun if the girl hadn't thrown herself in front of him, her arms tight on his shoulders, her head flung against his chest. "Please, Olin!" she cried. "They'll shoot! I know they will!" She turned her head sideways. "I'll go with you, Joe. I'll go, only you've got to promise—"

"Sure you'll go—if you know what's good for you." Varine's gun was out and he was loading it from his belt loops.

Haze Hartley's trigger finger loosened. He bobbed his head toward the deputy. "What're we gonna do with him?"

"He'll ride with us," Varine said. "Judge Houser might not like it if somebody spotted us lightin' a shuck without him—might figure we'd ditched him somewheres." Varine laughed harshly. Then: "We'll 'tend to him though—before we hit Timberline."

Hartley grunted. "He might start trouble."

"Not wearin' his own handcuffs, he won't. Hold out your hands, Olin."

At that moment Cochise, the half breed, stepped through the draperies. His eyes, like little blades, stabbed swiftly around the room. His face was as expressionless as a mahogany mask. Hartley handed Olin's gun to him, and he slid the weapon behind his belt.

Then Olin felt his wrists caught in the twin rings of cold steel as Varine snapped on the handcuffs. "You take

the key, Cochise," Varine said, tossing it to the silent half breed. "Not that he'll be needin' it, where he's headin'."

"Joe, please! You promised—"

"Shut up, Molly! Cochise, grab them bags there by the door. I'll take the bed roll."

Varine got Olin's hat from the table, slapped it rakishly on the deputy's head. He sent Molly out first. Varine walked a pace behind Olin, the two gunmen at either side. Out in the yard, Varine gave his first sign of nervousness. His glance darted about him and his tongue skimmed over his dry lips.

The horses were grazing under the Chino tree and Varine boosted Molly up in the saddle of his pinto. "Hold onto the bed roll," he said. "Me and you are ridin' double for a ways."

Haze Hartley still had his gun held down on Olin Telford, but suddenly his eyes traveled to Joe Varine. He said: "Before we shag out, Joe, what'd you do with the money?"

Varine's lips stripped back from his teeth in a wry, hard grin. "Gettin' a bit previous, ain't you, Haze? Maybe you're afraid you ain't gonna get your split."

"Maybe, Joe. Always figured you'd cross us up some day, when the stakes was big enough."

For a moment the tension piled up. On Olin Telford it was a weight, an actual heaviness. He had a dismal foresight of what was going to happen here, and looked down helplessly at his own manacled wrists, then over to where Molly tautly sat the pinto.

Cochise was standing at Molly's stirrup. He said, "Reckon we'll just make the divvy now, Joe."

Varine's thin face turned putty-gray. The grin went away from his stretching lips.

Hartley said, "Good idee. We may run into them Big Bit rannies before we reach Timberline."

Varine's voice shook. "You boys tryin' to tell me what to do?"

"Yeah," Hartley said. "Where's the *dinero?*"

Olin shot a glance to Molly and something definitely passed between them. And that was the moment that Varine snarled, "You ain't big enough around the belt to bluff me, Haze. I'll—"

"Look in them war bags, Cochise." Hartley jerked the words across his shoulder.

Varine went for his gun. The slap of his open palm against the butt made a flat, dead sound in the silence. But he never completed the draw. Hartley, a faster man than his bulk indicated, moved against Varine. There was a sudden glint of steel as he hit Varine in the temple with the barrel of his Colt, a vicious, chopping blow.

Varine, blinded and knocked half senseless, hit the ground, still clawing at the handle of his gun. Hartley rammed a boot heel down on Varine's crooked-up arm hard enough to jerk a howl of pain out of him. Then he ripped the gun from Joe's holster and stepped back, throwing the weapon in the dust behind him. He said, between long-pulled breaths: "No use you yellin', Joe. I'm gonna give it to you." He slanted the barrel of his Colt downward, earing back the hammer.

A YARD away, Olin Telford stood a stiff shape in the sunlight. He flicked a glance over to where the half breed was hunkered over the war bags, his long fingers riffling through them like brown, pecking birds.

Suddenly Cochise straightened. "Don't plug him yet, Haze." He jerked the words out with cranky violence. "They ain't no money in these bags. We gotta sweat it outa him."

Varine squirmed around in the dust. He rubbed a shaking hand across his forehead, started to open his mouth,

then saw Olin standing there in back of Hartley. He cried, "Olin, stop 'em!" His nose began to drip blood; it reached his writhing lips and rolled on down across his chin in bright, ragged streaks, dropping from chin to shirt front. His black eyes were wild, filled with fear. "Olin! For God's sake, Olin—"

The muscles of the deputy's shoulders bunched tautly beneath his flannel shirt. "You're the one put these cuffs on me, Joe." Then, with heavy irony, "Maybe you shouldn't have done it."

"Listen, Olin! It's all right about Molly!" Varine's voice was rising, shrill, frenzied. "You can have her, Olin! But please don't let 'em—"

"I can't stop 'em, I tell you! You fixed that."

Hartley jerked his head around toward the half breed. He called, "Look in that bed roll the girl's got," and whipped his glance back to Joe Varine. His trigged finger tightened.

Huddled tensely in the saddle, Molly's slim shoulders swung abruptly forward. Cochise, wheeling around to face her, lifted his long arms up for the bed roll that draped the pinto's withers. He didn't see the quick flick that was the girl's right boot kicking free of the stirrup, didn't see her draw that boot far back against the pinto's flank. Molly's whole body lurched with the effort as she drove her foot straight into the up-turned face of the half breed. With a yelp of pain Cochise staggered backward, flinging up a hand to his bruised cheek.

And that was the instant that Olin Telford's big frame whipped into motion. Swinging his handcuffed wrists above his head, he lunged at Haze Hartley. His big fists, slashing downward, caught the rustler a glancing blow across the jaw, and Hartley tripped, stumbling backward like a drunken man trying to keep his balance. Olin flung himself forward again. He swung his fists in another attempt, but missed as Hartley's hand convulsed on the butt of his Colt. The gun arced up, glittering bluely.

And then the gun roared, and it seemed to Olin as if a hammer blow had smashed against his shoulder, jerking him around.

The shock of the slug pulled him sideways, but it couldn't stagger his prepared and stiffened body. He dropped, a dead-solid weight, to his knees, the fingers of his manacled right hand closing clumsily on the butt of Varine's fallen gun.

Molly's sudden scream lanced across the silence, and Haze Hartley jerked his gaze momentarily in the direction of the girl.

Swaying on his knees, Olin pitched a shot at the half breed who stood hunched over beside the pinto, his own gun lining down on the deputy.

Olin's shot caught Cochise full in the chest, driving the wind out of him in a hard grunt. He teetered there for an instant on the balls of his feet, then broke at the knees and fell forward, arms outstretched.

At that instant Hartley's Colt slammed out its roar again. Olin Telford felt the searing, white-hot shock of the bullet across his scalp. His brain flamed and blinding white light burst behind his eyeballs. Then he felt himself slipping, pitching down helplessly into the dust, into oblivion. . . .

Fighting his way back to consciousness through waves of agony, he found that he was stretched out on his back, his throbbing head craddled in Molly's lap. The girl had staunched the flow of blood from the flesh wound in his shoulder, and was looking anxiously down at him, her face drawn and tear-stained.

He gave her a twisted grin, then, dizzily sitting up, discovered that his wrists were free and the handcuffs lay on the ground beside him. He said dazedly,

"Where's Hartley? What happened?"

Through a red mist, he looked around the yard. The motionless form of the half breed lay like a bundle of old clothes under the Chino tree, but Hartley was gone—and so was Joe Varine. . . .

Molly was so close to him, now, that he could feel her trembling. Comfortingly, he drew his good arm about her waist. "Hartley took him, Olin," she said; "and—oh, Olin, can't we do something to stop them?"

"We can try," he said shortly.

He turned and looked at her and his eyes told her everything. She gave a small, sobbing cry and pressed her face against his cheek. "It's so terrible," she whispered; "thinking of Joe out there, maybe—"

"It couldn't be helped, Molly."

"And the way he looked at us! I'll never forget it."

His arm tightened around her waist. "In time you will, Molly. "You'll forget a lot of things."

THE girl stiffened suddenly. The sound of a far shot lashed the still air. Another followed—and another. Then silence; utter, complete.

A shudder ran through the girl as she pressed the key to the handcuffs into Olin's hand. Her voice came, hardly more than a whisper. "I found it on Cochise," she said. "Oh, Olin! Why did I ever leave you!"

The silence ran on thin and tense, and then the sound of hoofs drummed in the hills. After an interval, six riders swept in out of the mesquite and reined up in the yard. One of them stopped his horse close to the deputy and the girl, looking down while the others watched. Billy Zwig's dust-dried lips were grim, unsmiling. He said: "I warned yuh we'd do it, Olin. We got Hartley, too." He shoved a hand into the pocket of his dusty coat, hauled out a thick bundle of bank notes. These he dropped at Olin's feet.

"Found the *dinero* in Varine's bed roll," he went on curtly. "It's Big Bit money, but we figure it's yore job to return it, accordin' to law." He scratched the edge of his bristled jaw with a horny forefinger; then his mouth relaxed in a grin. "Funny, but us fellas figured mebbeso yuh had other things on yore mind besides roddin' the law." The grin widened. "Reckon we was plumb wrong. Well, so long, Olin—and good luck." Zwig and the rest of the riders swung away.

Olin Telford turned his grave glance upon the girl. "Billy Zwig was right, Molly. I have had other things on my mind."

"Things, Olin?"

He drew her to him, then, and gently kissed her on the lips. "One thing, Molly. Just one."

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Man Who Stood in the Dust

THE beefy man sagging against the corral fence jabbed a thick forefinger at the boil of dust. "That's him," he said.

Old Jed Caraway frowned. "How in hell can you tell? You ain't seen his face yet."

"I don't have to." The big man shrugged. "That's the way his dad rode." He added with slow thoughtfulness, "An' Ben Rainbolt fought the same way he rode—like a hair-triggered slice of lightnin'."

In the corral, Jim Rainbolt hugged the leather bolted to the rangy, pitching bay. There was a thread of blood trickling from his dust-grimed mouth, but he was grinning.

The fighting thrill of straddling a rough one always did that—reached down into the core of him to stir up a strong excitement. He was young, and the battering hadn't yet hurt him. He had the speed for it, and the delicate sense of timing, and he had a body with the lean strength of a whip.

The bay lunged, with the desperation of defeat, for the fence, slammed against it, bounced off without shaking his rider, and then staggered to a trembling halt, head drooping.

Jim Rainbolt's voice was gentle as he

Then Rainbolt's guns bucked and this time Tuck Brady went down, while Blacky Reece triggered wildly!

WHO COULDN'T FORGET THE GUNSPEED IN HIS TWO HANDS!

With Satan

By
ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY
Author of "The Texan," etc.

swung down and stripped off the saddle. "You'll do, mister. There's more brains in that hammerhead of yours than you let on to have."

they didn't look like much because the wrinkles at their corners were gray, too, with dust.

They called Jim Rainbolt and his two killer Colts in to rod Stormy River range through its first deadly feud, and if Signpost beef still had to go onto free grass behind guns, they'd call Jim Rainbolt in again!

He flipped the saddle up on the fence, went after his hat which had snapped off. He came back toward Caraway with it, slapping at the dust. The youth in his face showed now—he couldn't have been much over twenty. A faint, reminiscent grin pulled at his lips; it was a grin that was simple and warm and friendly. His eyes were gray, and

Halfway to the fence he lifted his glance to Caraway. He started to say, "Jed, that bay pony'll run the hocks off anything—" and he stopped, staring.

Jed Caraway cleared his throat. On his wrinkled face was a look of determination and anger; those two emotions were like a faulty mask through which a deep bewilderment showed. Old Jed Caraway had never been a fighter. He didn't quite understand the fight he was in now.

He announced jerkily, "Jim this here is Tuck Brady. I hired him to take over while we bust that damn Broken Stirrup outfit. Brady — he's a gun-handler."

Jim Rainbolt said, "Yeah, I know." His eyes didn't leave the big man's beefy, bulldog face.

Tuck Brady chuckled deep in his throat. "Kid, you should have left word where you was goin'. Everybody in the Stormy River country figgers you ran out."

The words were softly spoken and they seemed indifferent, but they weren't. Brady's eyes were alert as a cat's. There was a core of hard threat to his lazy inspection.

Before Rainbolt could answer, Caraway burst out, "Kid, why in hell didn't you say you was Ben Rainbolt's boy? Cripes, if I'd known you fought in the Stormy River War—"

Jim Rainbolt stood very still. His slight body, relaxed, looked as if it lacked the strength to pack a shell belt and sixgun. He said with husky fierceness, "I'm not a gun-fighter. I hired out to bust your rough string—an' nothin' else."

"There's some men," Brady drawled, "that get a little powder smoke up their nose, an' the rest of their lives they go around with an eye peeled for somethin' to jump behind."

THE color slipped away out of Jim Rainbolt's face, and the gray of his eyes was the color of tempered metal. Tuck Brady, he understood, was prodding him, wondering if this slim man whose gun skill was as sure as his riding skill, was the same man his father had been.

"All I want to find out," Brady continued, "is who I can count on an' who I can't. The way I get this set-up, the Broken Stirrup aims to bust this outfit. They've rustled your beef, cut your fences. Then a rider gets plugged, an' when you call 'em on it, they jump your spring."

"Hell, me an' Blake Towne been friends for forty years," Caraway cried wrathfully. "We've always run our beef in the same valley without a rub!"

"Up till now," Brady put in.

"That's right. Only damned if Blake don't git notions of bein' a cattle king an' wipin' out my Signpost brand. We both used Horseshoe Springs. Both needed the water. The title to that section's been muddled from the start, but hell, we never bothered to clear it up 'cause we was friends an' it didn't matter."

Brady nodded. "So when this ruckus starts he claims the Springs an' ties you up with an injunction. Lays out a rifle guard to keep your cows from water."

Caraway swore bitterly. "They're dyin' up there. Dyin' on their feet. Day an' night you can hear 'em bellerin' for the water they can't git."

"They'll have it tonight," Tuck Brady said. "We're takin' your beef in behind guns. Tell your boys that, Caraway, an' let the ones that got irons put some oil on 'em. I want to talk to Rainbolt."

Jed Caraway went stumping up toward the bunkhouse, and Tuck Brady's beefy face, turned toward Jim Rainbolt, was calculating and cold.

"We fought on different sides in Stormy River, kid. You aim to take up where we left off?"

Jim Rainbolt's voice was very low. "Why should I?"

"You might just see it that way. Some gents would."

Rainbolt looked down at his hands, slim and long-fingered and quick as light. "I left there because I was through gun-fightin'."

"Maybe you're smart," Brady said evenly. "It didn't get Ben anywhere except into a hell of a jackpot."

Rainbolt's head snapped up. "He didn't murder Tom Seats. I said it was a lie then an' I still do."

"No?" Tuck Brady was sure of his ground now. His watchful manner changed to one of bullying scorn. "You never proved different. Neither did anybody else. There was killing blood in Ben, an' it busted loose on him."

Savagely, every muscle in him tight, Jim Rainbolt flung back, "That's a lie, too! You'll—"

"Kid," Brady said, "you askin' me to back it up with a gun, are you?" And when the boy said nothing, he went on grimly. "What I stayed to tell you was to drag your rope out of here."

Jim Rainbolt stood silently, a slim youngster with anger building in him. Yet something held the anger back. The strength of his fight with it made his lips a narrow and colorless line.

"Look," he said huskily, "broncs are my game now. I'm through with the other. All I want—"

"Your outfit's goin' to war," Brady sneered. "Kid, the guts ran out of you back in Stormy River. I'd have called your hand there if you'd stayed. I'll call you here if you don't pull your freight."

The words were callously spoken, but there was more behind them. Tuck Brady was leaning forward in the dusk of early evening, the muscles of his face set. It hit Rainbolt suddenly that the man was afraid of something, that he was bulling his luck on a hand he wasn't sure of.

"Travel, kid," Brady said. "Right now. Tonight." He wheeled around and went with long strides toward the ranch house.

In the dusk Jim Rainbolt looked down at his hands. Gunman's hands. Fast and strong and sure. He had learned to handle a gun from Ben Rainbolt. Sheriff Ben Rainbolt whose gun skill was a legend. Ben Rainbolt, gunfighter, who had been called in to rod the Stormy River range through the bitter and deadly feud known as the Stormy River War.

Ben Rainbolt had been finished with his guns when they came to him. He had buckled them on once more for the sake of justice and the law. He had cleaned up that savage feud which was wrecking a range.

A RINGING clamor came beating through the twilight as the cook hammered at the triangle suspended by the cook shack door. Men came tumbling out of the bunkhouse. Jim Rainbolt went along slowly. He was the last to wash up at the bench outside and go in.

The clatter and rattle of dishes seemed louder than usual. He knew as he hesitated for a moment in the doorway that word about him had been passed. The Signpost crew knew who he was and that he wasn't riding with them tonight.

Bitterness touched him instantly. These men weren't fighting men. The Signpost wasn't a fighting outfit any more than the Broken Stirrup was. This affair had no more reason or sense to it than the Stormy River War had had.

He let his glance slip around the table, taking in young Davey Whittacker, "Meat-Nose" Malloy, old "Badger" Lee. They were cowhands, not gunmen. Of the two newcomers Caraway had signed on to try out before roundup, he wasn't so sure. There was the faintest suspicion of hardcase about them, though up until now neither of them had worn guns. He had a faint and unplacable recollection of having seen them before.

Rainbolt dropped into an end seat, reached for the nearly empty platter of steaks. Across from him, seated next to Jed Caraway, Tuck Brady went on talking, his mouth full.

"Know Ben Rainbolt? Hell, I crossed irons with him. A couple yeller-bellies rabbited on us or maybe that war would have come out different."

"Square, wasn't he?" Whittacker urged. "A real white man?"

"Square as a carpenter's corner," agreed Brady. "He made his rep by

playin' it square, anyhow. Only he wound up a hell of a lot different."

Jim Rainbolt laid down his knife and fork. They made a sound that was striking because in that room the only other sound was the crackling of the wood in the cookstove. No man was moving or eating.

Davey Whittacker's beardless face turned a burning red, but he floundered on with his next question. "Just what was the straight of that, Mr. Brady?"

Tuck Brady's hands were below the table edge, in his lap. "Why, what happened to Ben Rainbolt," he replied evenly, "was what happens to a good many of your gun-slinging lawhawks. He got to figgerin' his gun was God. Your legal killer sees so much blood spilled it don't mean nothin' to him any more. He gets to thinkin' folks has got to hop when he hollers or else take a slug through their backbone. He gets so edgy he'll snap a shot if you fumble reachin' for a handkerchief. Killin' gets into him so he can't quit. He's got to go on doin' it, right or wrong."

Jim Rainbolt stood up, pushing the bench back with his legs. He said, "Brady—"

Tuck Brady didn't appear to see or hear him. He went on, coolly sneering. "That was Ben Rainbolt's story. After the War was over, he was still huntin' trouble. There was a harmless old coot in Stormy River. Tom Seats. Wouldn't even nudge the wind out of a pony that was blowin' up his belly. Well, this Seats said some little thing or other that riled Rainbolt. No witnesses, you understand, so Rainbolt just up an' plugged him. He'd have got away with it, too, only 'fore he died Seats managed to shake a slug out of his gun. Hit Rainbolt in the belly, an' three days later he was dead."

Fury was making Jim Rainbolt's voice tremble. "Brady, the man that says Ben murdered Tom Seats is a damned liar!"

Tuck Brady half rose, malevolence in his eyes. "Keep your yap closed, kid. Ben Rainbolt turned out to be a rotten murderer. When he died there was blood on his hands an' in his heart."

Old Jed Caraway jerked out worriedly, "Doggone it, kid, you got no call—"

"If your guts weren't the wrong color, kid," snarled Brady, "you'd do your talkin' with a gun."

Jim Rainbolt was coming around the end of the table. Tuck Brady lunged up and away from the bench, and Rainbolts fist, whipping out, cracked against his mouth. The blow shook Brady but didn't drive his solid weight off balance.

He set himself, cursing, and lashed out with fists like clubs. One of them caught Rainbolt on the side of the head, slamming him over against the clapboard wall.

Brady was surprisingly fast for a man so heavy. He spun around after Rainbolt, went driving in. Each of his slugging blows was like the smash of a maul. Rainbolt, with deep fury whipping him on, slashed his fists like rapier thrusts at Brady's mouth, his eyes, his belly. They stung, but they didn't stop the big gunman.

In the open, with room to work, Rainbolt might have had a chance. Tuck Brady had him crowded into the cramped corner of the cook shack, was rocking his slight frame to the ankles with one thundering smash after another.

BRADY'S snarling face and the room were blurring in front of Rainbolt. The strength had been battered out of him. Very dimly he heard Jed Caraway crying shrilly, "Quit it, man! Damn it, you'll kill him!"

Mercifully, those bone-crushing jolts ceased. Jim Rainbolt sagged where he stood, unable to lift his head, supporting himself by pressing his hands against

the wall.

He heard Brady growl, "Goin' into a fight I don't want a damned coward at my back. I told you before to clear out of here. This time, do it!"

He caught Rainbolt by the shoulders, slung him around and sent him reeling through the door.

The coolness of the night air washed against Rainbolt's face, and he managed to stay on his feet. At the horse trough in the lower corner of the yard he found water. Its cold wetness was a relief, and energy began to flow again through bruised muscles.

Voices and the clump of boots told that the Signpost crew had finished supper. The voices were subdued as the men drifted to the bunkhouse, preparing to ride.

In the yellow rectangle of the cook shack doorway Rainbolt saw Tuck Brady, and his hand moved to his gunless hip. It stayed there as Brady stepped out into the darkness, but Brady dropped out of his mind, and into it, instead, came the last memories he had of his father.

He wondered how many times in his life Ben had warned him, "There never was a gunman that didn't have his gunfightin' backfire on him if he lived long enough."

Ben had meant what Tuck Brady had meant when he was talking at the table. Something happened to a gunman. Something tore the fineness of heart and the honor out of him, and substituted raw, murderous impulses.

Jim Rainbolt leaned against the edge of the watering trough, the breath coming hard in his lungs. He had never known, for sure, that that hadn't happened to Ben. He could call it a lie, and fight because of it, but deep in his heart he couldn't be certain. Maybe, sucked down at last by the gun skill he had always mastered, Ben Rainbolt had brutally shot Tom Seats for no reason that was sound.

In the darkness of the Signpost ranch yard, Jim Rainbolt whispered, "No. No, he didn't!"

But he knew that his doubt was the reason that he, Jim Rainbolt, who possessed a gun skill folks said was greater than his father's, had shucked his guns. That was why he hated them and feared them.

Ben Rainbolt, dying, had murmured, "Kid, forget this. Wipe it out of your head. Go on ridin' broncs. That's a man's game, an' it leaves him nothin' to hate or regret. Promise me that, kid. You promise?"

Horses were being roped in the corral, saddles slapped on. The bustle of activity sifted down to Jim Rainbolt. Unwilling to be seen, he fell back into the deeper shadows along the fence. He watched as riders pulled away and trotted up past the house.

There was a queer tight feeling in the pit of his stomach. He didn't really belong, of course. He had simply hired out to put the saddle stock in shape for spring roundup, but the Signpost was nevertheless his outfit, and it was heading into a fight.

He ought to be riding with Davey Whittacker and Badger Lee and the others, but he wasn't going to be. He had a trail to hit. A trail that would take him away from here, and farther away from the Stormy River country. There was a crawling bitterness to the thought.

They believed back in Stormy River that he had run away. They would believe the same thing here. Crouched in the shadows, with the sound of shuffling horses echoing to him, Jim Rainbolt understood that that was what he was doing.

He stiffened abruptly, holding himself motionless. It was Tuck Brady's voice, lifted in a call: "Get 'em started, Caraway. I'll be right along."

HOOFBEATS swelled into a drumming rattle, began to fade away. Jim Rainbolt's stare probed the dark in the direction from which Brady's voice had come. Two riders, horses sidling impatiently, bulked against the night sky no more than a dozen yards away.

Tuck Brady was chuckling. "You did a good job, Doc."

"Hell, Tuck, it was like shootin' hawgs in a pen. First I'd whittle off a little Signpost beef, then some Broken Stirrup dogies. The wrangle started. I pulled down some wire an' scattered a few hides where they'd be found. Both them old devils, Caraway an' Towne, was fit to be tied. When I lay in the brush one night an' burnt a few caps at a Signpost puncher, Caraway blew up. He went rampagin' over to the Stirrup, an' Towne run him off with a scatter-gun. Caraway swore he wouldn't let the Broken Stirrup have water—only Towne beat him to the draw."

Rainbolt's teeth locked. The second voice belonged to one of the newly-hired Signpost riders, and the vague familiarity of his face was now clear. Doc Sorby was a petty rustler and pseudo-gunman who had operated on the fringe of the Stormy River trouble.

Brady laughed softly. "It couldn't have worked out better."

"I reckon not. When I sprung your name on him, Caraway took to it like a starvin' cow to good grass. 'A gun-handler's what I need,' the old fool says. 'Get hold of him. I'll show him real money.' "

"It'll be a three way split," Brady said. "You an me an Blacky."

"To hell with Blacky."

"Let that wait," Brady advised. "Right now you stick behind an' keep an eye peeled for Rainbolt. Keep him away from the Springs, if you have to put a gun in his ribs to do it. If he has the same kind of notions that Ben had, he can make trouble."

"That damned sliver of kindlin'?"

"You ain't seen him throw lead. I have."

"He won't get past me," Sorby grunted, "an if he does, those rannihans at the Springs will pile grief on him. They're sore he didn't throw in with 'em."

"Don't let him past you," said Brady again, sharply. He pulled his mount around, went loping after the others. Doc Sorby walked his horse to the bunkhouse, dismounted and went inside.

Jim Rainbolt straightened and took a long breath. Brady's game here was an old one. When there was no spot for his guns, he had to make one. Through Doc Sorby he had set the Signpost and the Broken Stirrup at each other's throats, building up a feud that only gunsmoke could settle. Jed Caraway and Blake Towne, friends for forty years, were hiring gunmen to smash each other.

Jim Rainbolt's hand brushed his weaponless thigh. This, of course, was what Tuck Brady had been afraid of from the first. He was afraid of what Jim Rainbolt, son of Sheriff Ben Rainbolt who was as square as they came, would do if he scented the trick.

Rainbolt swore. This would have to be stopped. He would have to stay long enough to tell Caraway that he and Blake Towne had both been fooled.

He took a single step toward the bunkhouse, and halted. He held out his hands and looked at them, and he could feel the cold sweat starting on his face and running down under the collar of his shirt.

Just telling Caraway, he realized, wouldn't be enough. It was too late. Nothing could stop this now but calling Tuck Brady and matching guns with him.

That fact hammered at him, hitting him like a physical blow. He knew that

his hands were trembling, and he could hear the breath hissing between his teeth. A cold chill had crept into his arms, making them stiff and leaden.

For a long minute he stood so, bitterness pulling at the corners of his mouth. Then he began to walk toward the bunkhouse, rubbing his arms.

The blankets of Doc Sorby's bunk were rumpled. He had tugged a bottle from beneath them and was tilting it up. He went on with his drink, but he swung the gun in his right hand around without haste to cover Rainbolt. There was no hurry. His bunk was twenty feet from the door where Rainbolt stood.

FINISHED, he wiped his lips and said, "Come in, kid. Come on in. You've saved me the trouble of lookin' for you." Sorby had a lean, peculiarly pasty face in which tobacco-blackened teeth were prominent.

Rainbolt shrugged. "I'm pullin' out."

"Not yet awhile, you ain't. Brady wants you kep' in sight until the party's over at the Springs."

Rainbolt's face didn't change. "No objection, I reckon, if I start throwin' my gear together."

Without waiting for an answer Rainbolt began to collect his things. He pulled a spare shirt down from a nail in the wall and raked into it the knick-knacks piled along the shelf above his bunk. He sorted them over, sorted them over again, scowled and looked up at Sorby.

"Know anything about my shavin' brush? It was here this mornin'."

"That damn hawg-bristle whisk-broom? No." Doc Sorby had taken another drink and was lounging against the far wall. He still had his twenty foot margin so he hadn't bothered to cock his gun. He held it by the trigger guard, the butt loosely under his thumb.

Rainbolt began to swear. He dragged his war-bag from under the bunk, groped into it.

Too late Doc Sorby saw the potential danger. He stiffened suddenly, yelled, "Hey, git away from that—" He fumbled wildly with his gun and kicked out a shot.

Jim Rainbolt was throwing himself backward, snatching from its wrapping of oilcloth a worn sixgun. Sorby's bullet ripped into the canvas of the war-bag. Rainbolt wrenched himself around as he fell so that he landed on his left side. With one rapid and sure movement he swept his gun-filled right hand across his body, thumbed the hammer.

Doc Sorby's weapon exploded, harmlessly again because this time Sorby was pitching down, a look of bewilderment and dismay on his thin face.

Rainbolt got up warily, the bite of the powdersmoke in his lungs, and went across to Sorby. Doc Sorby was dead, his backbone cut in two.

Jim Rainbolt's teeth were set tightly together as he dug out the other gun and the two belts. He weighed them in his hands, taking the feel of them. They were Ben's guns. One of them had killed Tom Seats.

He blew out the lamp on the table and went outside with the twin weapons buckled about his middle. Sorby's horse had sidled away from the shooting, but he let Rainbolt catch him up and swing into the saddle.

Jim Rainbolt was shivering, and not from the coolness of the night air. The pony under him was a traveler; he let him out in a hard run for the hills which lay in a dark and broken line to the north.

He rode with his thoughts pounded into a groove, wholly gripped by a cold and harsh anger. Life had a way of savagely tricking a man. It gave him principles he couldn't deny, and then paid off for those principles in disgrace and defeat. Ben had been tricked; now he, Jim Rainbolt, was heading into the

same thing. He had fought to escape it, as Ben had, and he had failed.

An oath broke from between his tight lips. This was the end of a hopeless struggle. He was breaking the threads that bound him to a new life, and afterwards they couldn't be knotted together again. Sooner or later he would go the way Ben had gone.

An hour of strong riding got Rainbolt into the hills. His pony was laboring, but he held grimly to the pace. From up ahead came the flat, sharp bark of a rifle.

Horseshoe Springs lay in the middle of a broad gully. Rainbolt had visited the place before, and he cut now along an angling shelf of rock to come in at the lower side. The hills parted before him and he reined in, his glance running coolly over the valley. Less than half a moon rode the night sky, but it was enough to shed a faint glow over the scene.

There were three cattle trails leading down to the water. Two of them were on the Broken Stirrup side. The third, which the Signpost used, had been blocked by a tangle of fallen pines. Any attempt to remove the blockade could be prevented by rifle fire from the willow thickets which rimmed the Springs.

RAINBOLT could see splashes of flame among the willows, and the answering muzzle bursts strung out along the rocky ridge which flanked it. Tuck Brady was going to pound the water hole thoroughly with lead before he rushed it. The crackle of the shooting surged up into the higher hills. A low undertone of sound was the bellowing of steers jammed up behind the barricade.

Jim Rainbolt touched spur to flank, went at a lope down into the valley, heading for the ridge. He forgot the bruises of his beating. Still rising in him was the tide of his cold anger which flogged him on, keyed his nerves to a fighting pitch. He had made his choice; it wasn't a good one, but he had to play it out.

He lifted out each gun in turn, checked the action, settled the weight in his palm.

He had guessed that a man riding boldly into the no-man's-land between willows and ridge would cause a cessation of fire. He was right. In the vague moonlight neither side was able immediately to label him, and the shooting fell off.

A dozen yards out from the base of the ridge he stopped. His anger was gone. In its place had come a cool precision. Every muscle in him was alert, poised. Each of his faculties was whetted to an edge.

His voice lifted, even and hard: "You've been double-crossed, Caraway! Brady framed you, lettin' Blacky Reece an' Doc Sorby do the dirty work. They started this grief, not Blake Towne!"

He snapped those words off short, and said, "All right, Brady; this it it!"

Then he had slipped out of the saddle and was running for the ridge. He heard Tuck Brady roar, "That's Rainbolt! Take him from your side, Blacky!"

Rainbolt saw, in the rocks above him, Brady's looming bulk. He saw the spurt of gun flame and felt the shock as the bullet hit him. The force of it knocked him sideways and down so that he had to catch himself on one knee. He got his gun up.

Brady shouted, "In on him! Get in on him, Blacky!"

To Rainbolt's left a figure sprang out of the darkness, came scrambling along the ridge, shooting wildly.

Brady shot again before Rainbolt could steady himself. Then Rainbolt's gun bucked in his fist. It bucked twice more before Rainbolt whirled to throw

a shot to his left. He heard but didn't see the crashing confusion as Tuck Brady, with three bullets in his chest, plowed headfirst down the rubble-strewn incline.

Blacky Reece had hesitated at that sight. Rainbolt threw a bullet at his crouching figure, lunged after it, his thumbs dragging back the hammers of his guns.

Reece was hit. He half fell, struggling vainly with both hands to get his sixgun up. He saw Rainbolt lurching in to close quarters and yelled in a terror-stricken voice, "Cripes, man, don't —don't—"

In that instant, spurred by the fight's surging momentum, Jim Rainbolt understood how easily murder could be done. That bleak intention filled his mind; the skill in his hands was bent toward it.

He felt that, and caught himself, and stood there with death waiting to be driven from his gun barrel.

Black Reece, collapsing, whispered brokenly, "Don't kill me, for God's sake! I can—square Ben. I swear I can . . .!"

It was a close thing, so close that the palms of Jim Rainbolt's hands were wet with sweat by the time he had holstered his guns. He was still shaking a little when old Jed Caraway came clattering down from the ridge, yelling like a lost calf.

It was dawn in the Signpost ranch house. Jed Caraway pushed a bottle across the table and said, "Another one won't hurt. Think that bandage'll hold them ribs together?"

Jim Rainbolt nodded. "Sure. What'd Blake Towne have to say?"

"He cussed me," declared Caraway, "harder than I'd let any other man in the world cuss me." The old man scraped at his chin, grinning. "But I reckon, all in all, he got just about as good as he sent."

RAINBOLT swung up out of the chair and went to the window. Caraway, eyeing his back shrewdly, murmured, "I was sure tickled, kid, to hear what Blacky Reece had to say about Ben."

"It was Brady that shot him," said Rainbolt. "Him an' Tom Seats both. Then he framed it to look the way it did. Brady'd been licked, an' he wanted to get even." The words stopped coming. There was a hard look in Rainbolt's eyes; their gray color had the cold sheen of metal.

Jed Caraway reached for the bottle and cleared his throat. "There's somethin' else I been meanin' to tell you. I think—" and he began to talk very fast "—that when you downed them three gunhawks you had the doggonedest piece of bull-headed luck a man ever had. A gun-fighter? You ain't worth a tinker's damn as a gun-fighter! That blamed hog-leg of yours just happened to go off in the right places. As a gun-toter you ain't worth a plate of burned beans! Never was an' never will be! If you stay on here—an' I can sure as hell use you—an' open yore yap once about gun-fightin', I'll bust you across the horns with my boot! Understand?"

Jim Rainbolt turned away from the window. The hard look had left his eyes, and he was grinning. "Doggone it, Jed. You mean that?"

"Hell, yes, I mean it," growled Caraway. "Fight? You can't even drink! Where's your glass?"

Pray, Cowboy, or Go

CHAPTER I

No Prayers

WEARY weeks on the trail ended when the herd was turned over to the buyer on the flats outside of the town of Manzanita. Men who, these last few days, had come to the point of wanting to kill each other, relaxed singing nerves. The herd, heat, sweat, dust, rain and cold and long saddle hours were done with. They could smile a little again, as they drew their pay from a harassed, relieved trail boss and went to the wagon to spool their belongings.

Young Shell Overlin was one of the last to take his time. He was in no hurry to hit for town and toss his money down his throat, and what women were available for a trail hand did not appeal to Overlin.

Hassar fired once more, the slug striking close to Overlin's body

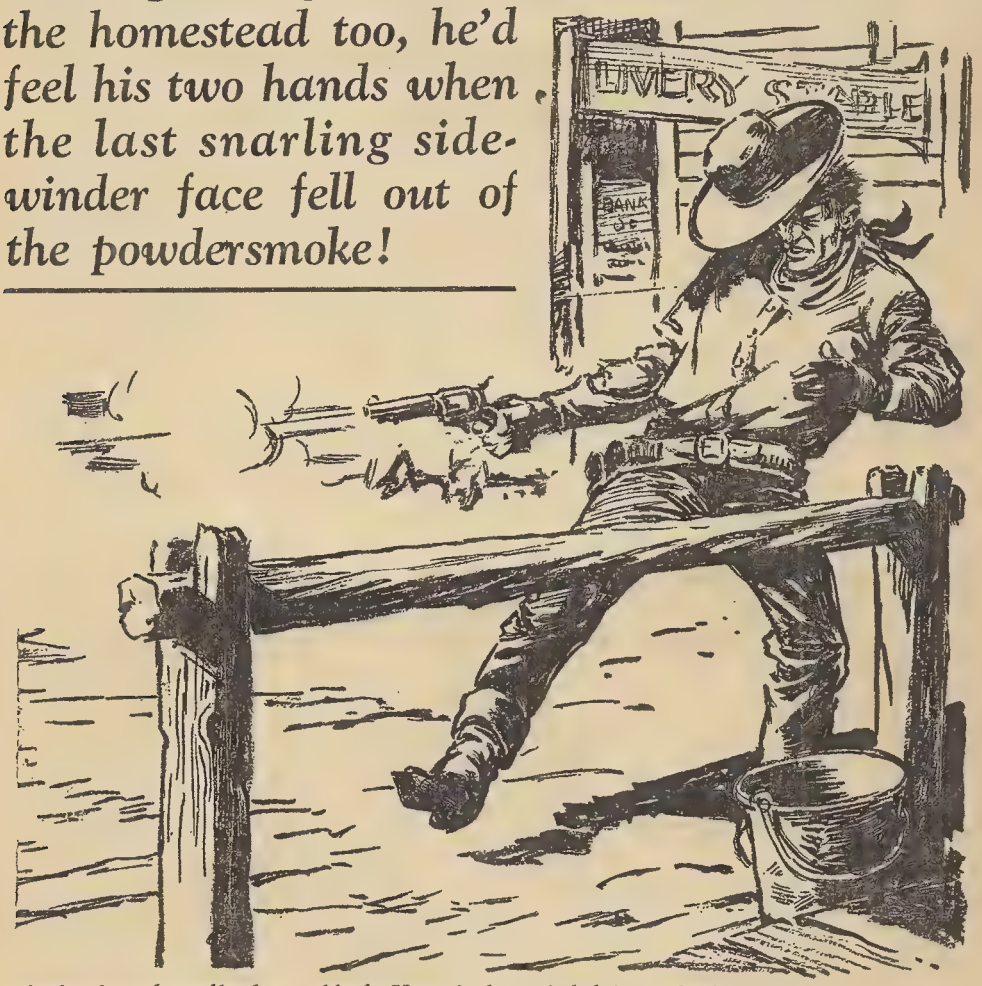
There was a little bonus for Overlin. He looked his surprise.

"It's because you was one of the few

for Your Gun!

By JAMES P. OLSEN
Author of "A Battle Syndicate Rides onto Shotgun Range," etc.

The long trails and the cow camps had claimed all the life Shell Overlin could remember, and now in this helltown the heat and the sweat and the dust would not slow his draw—Shell Overlin would get the girl with the golden hair, he'd get the homestead too, he'd feel his two hands when the last snarling sidewinder face fell out of the powdersmoke!



ripping into the walk; then suddenly Hassar's figure faded from view!

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"Oh—them." Overlin shrugged.

"Don't take 'em so easy," the boss

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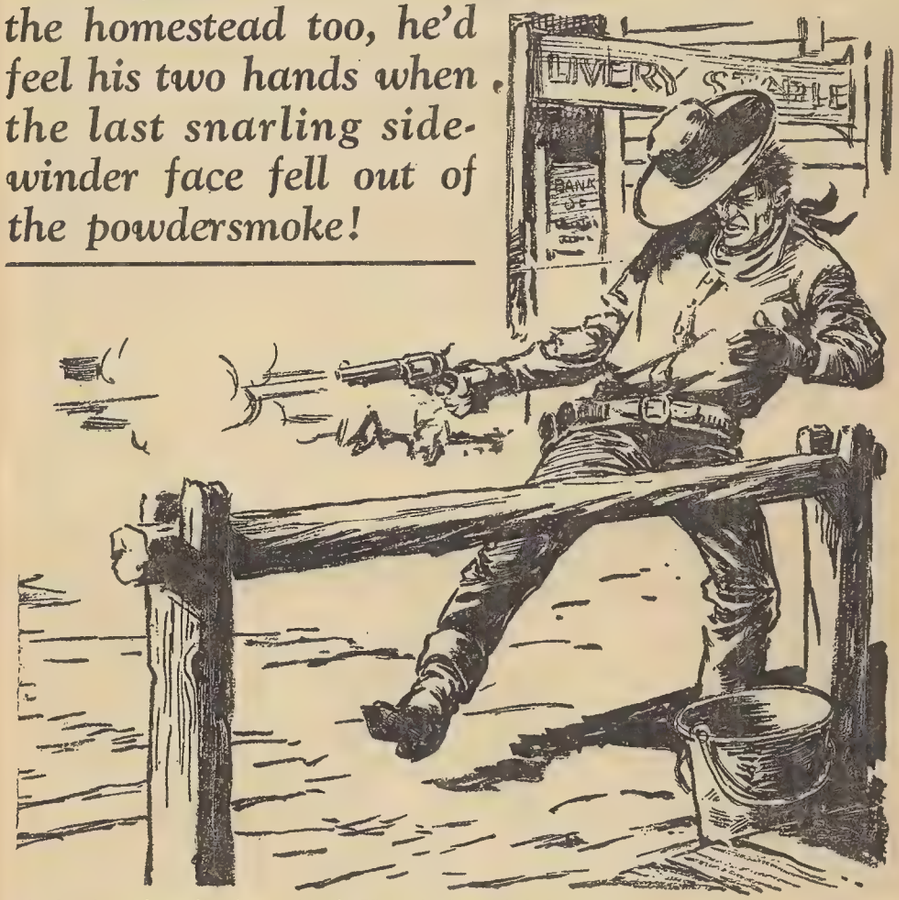

warned. "You're just a kid yet, Shell —even if you are a mighty level-headed one."

Shell Overlin nodded, shook hands and went to get his roll.

At the wagon, gaunt Luke Teed was on his knees making up a pack of the stuff blocky Ike Hasser handed him. He was passing Teed a worn blanket when Overlin came up.

A slight figure in worn, sweaty pants and shirt and hat, Overlin stopped and teetered on his high heels, hands on his slender hips that supported the weight of his cartridge belt and holstered old .45 Colt six-gun. Overlin's rather thin, freckled face was unemotional, his blue-gray eyes steady.

"I reckon you're makin' a mistake," he drawled. "That's my blanket you're fixin' to take."

Other trail hands stopped, looked up, a few of them moved away. Teed sat back on his boots and frowned. Ike Hasser shook the old blanket in one hand.

"Meanin," he said harshly, "to claim we're stealin' offa you? You tellin' us we're takin' what ain't ours?"

"Call it a mistake an let 'er run like that," Overlin answered. "But it's my blanket. Give it here."

HE extended his left hand, then ducked when Hasser tried to fling the blanket over him and entangle him. Overlin hit Hasser flush on the mouth and drove him backward. He spun about, then, as Teed dived at him head-first. Overlin raised his knee and caught Teed on the chin.

"Stop this!" The trail boss's voice crackled in their ears. He waved a cocked pistol for emphasis. "Hasser, never mind that gun. Take your hand off of it. Teed, get up if you can, and then both of you hit a hightail yonderly. You know that rildy belongs to Shell. You took it just to start a rumpus. You two been trying to spell your ugly natures on the kid a long time, now. Too bad he didn't muss you up more than he did."

Teed and Hasser packed in silence. Mounted, ready to leave, Hasser snarled at Overlin: "I'm hopin' we come acrost you when your dry nurse ain't along."

"Yeah, *two* of you," jeered Overlin.

"If I was you, I sure wouldn't go into Manzanita," the trail boss advised. "Those two'll get mean drunk—"

"Aw, they'll likker up an' forget the whole thing," Overlin cut in. "Besides," he added, "I spent all the life I can remember on the trail an' in cow camps. I never dodged no man yet, an' they ain't nobody needin' to dodge me."

His hot roll slung, Overlin mounted his personal horse and sloped for Manzanita. He rode in slowly, enjoying his first true contact with "civilization" in many, many weeks. He saw nothing tawdry or raw in the way Manzanita's false-fronted buildings faced each other across a street ridiculously narrow—considering the room the builders had. This cow town was far, far better than others young Overlin had seen and, as cow towns were all he'd ever known, Manzanita was a place to pleasure in.

He rode the length of the dusty street, turned down a side way and reined up at the foot of a little slope, looking up at the big white house that overlooked the town. Overlin blinked at the impressive palace of balconies and curlicues and gables, wondered what sort of people camped in such a place and rode back to the main street. Mounts of men off the trail were tied at the gnawed hitchrails before Manzanita's three saloons. Teed and Hasser had tied in front of Murphy's Saloon—largest and most impressive of the three.

Overlin noted this but casually as he went on and stepped from the saddle onto the high porch fronting the Gen-

eral Merchandisery. He paused just inside the doorway, nose wrinkled to catch a medley of odors of leather and cloth and food. He moved on, then, making a round of inspection. Gravely, then, he purchased fresh apples—a rare delicacy with him, and stood munching while he studied the rows of canned goods on the shelves.

The storekeeper offered the services of a can-opener and a spoon if Overlin desired to make a purchase and eat it here. Overlin nodded.

"In a bit," he said. "There's so many things, a feller can't try them all, so he's best off if he takes his time an' tries to pick the right ones first."

"If a lot of men would order their lives like that!" the storekeeper said, but Overlin didn't understand what he meant.

Overlin hardly heard the light footfalls that sounded when Kenya Wade entered the store. He was first aware of her when he heard her voice. It stopped him still, head cocked, listening. He reckoned he'd never heard such a voice before. It sort of ran, like the low murmur of a clear meadow brook.

Overlin turned. And stared in a fascinated, astounded manner.

TRIM in a white dress, little Kenya Wade looked like a flower; a flower with a glorious crown of golden bronze. His little sack of apples clutched in his left hand, Shell Overlin stood spellbound, wide, round eyes feasting on the girl. He seemed without thought as he watched the fine, saucy way she tilted her chin, the way her red lips moved. He knew she had turned and was looking at him, but to save him, he couldn't look away.

A little frown of annoyance creased her brow at first, then went away. There was nothing bold or unclean in the way Overlin looked at her. Fascination, perhaps a distant adoration marked his gaze—but that was all.

Kenya smiled. Overlin gulped and blushed with a muttered, "Sorry, miss," walked past her and from the store.

"Who is he?" Kenya asked the storekeeper, recovering herself.

"Dunno, Miss Wade. Whoever, he ain't the usual run of saddleman. The way he looked at you—Sort of hungry and worshipping and all."

"I know," she admitted. "It made me feel a little—well, odd."

She moved toward the door, curiosity impelling her to see which way Overlin had gone. Only a few steps, the girl saw as she paused in the doorway. She gasped, then, and grabbed the doorframe as she grasped the full significance of the scene before her.

Overlin stood in the middle of the board walk, facing toward Murphy's saloon. Luke Teed, fallen into a little crouch, was facing him. To one side and a few feet back of Teed, Ike Hasser stood with his hands on his hips, a wolfish grin pulling his lips.

"You're drunk, Teed," Kenya Wade heard Overlin declare. There was an honest quiver in Overlin's voice. "There ain't no use makin' fight talk, or in fightin'."

"He don't want to play, he wants to pray," Teed hooted. "All right, get down on your knees. Beg for your hide, damn you. Pray or pass at your gun."

Resignation to trouble aged Overlin. He drew in a sighing breath. "I won't pray," he said, and went for his gun.

CHAPTER II

Altered Brands

OVERLIN performed no miracle of lightning, gifted gunmanship; yet the manner in which he drew his gun showed he didn't lack

for practice. He wasted no motion, nor did he seem to hurry. His gun was leveled when Teed fired. Overlin didn't know if the shot missed him a mile or an inch. What mattered was that Teed had tried too much for speed and had missed.

Overlin, lips pressed tightly together, a grayish band around his mouth, let the arched hammer of his Colt slip from under the crooked first joint of his thumb. Teed seemed slammed with a great invisible hammer. He jerked halfway around, stumbling, his gun flipping out to raise a puff of dust as it landed in the street. Teed's right arm flopped helplessly and a dark stain appeared on his sleeve just above the elbow.

"Hasser!" Teed shrieked, tripping. He fell into the man he called for, knocking him off balance against the front of the saloon and spoiling his shot for him. Overlin leaped forward and shoved the muzzle of his gun against Hasser's left side.

"Drop it!" Overlin commanded, a high, breaking note of tension in his voice.

Hasser let go his gun as though the butt plates had suddenly become white hot, and held his hands wide of his body. Teed sat on the walk, his back against the saloon, his legs sticking straight out before him. He stared dumbly at his arm and started moaning as he rocked from side-to-side.

Men were spilling out into the street. A fat man with a star on his overall jacket came puffing up. Overlin stepped back.

"They jumped me," he explained.

"That's a lie!" Hasser yammered. "This gun-slingin' kid hopped onto us. Ask my pardner there."

"Anybody see this start?" The marshal looked at the ring of men around them. Nobody answered. The marshal turned to Overlin.

"I reckon you'll have to come along," he said. "Looks to me like you've plumb ruint this feller's arm."

"Just a minute, Mr. Leander."

Kenya Wade came off the store porch and marched through the lane men made suddenly.

Overlin removed his hat, and Leander did the same.

"This gentleman," Kenya said in a clipped way, nodding to Overlin, "left the store a minute or so ago. I saw him. These two men accosted him. He asked them not to start a fight. They insisted."

"Well, they sure got accommodated," Leander allowed. "This puts a different brand on the business, then. You—" to Hasser— "get your friend to the doctor. Let your gun lay. Long as you are around Manzanita, don't tote a pistol."

"He's ruined me," Teed groaned as Hasser helped him up.

"We ain't finished with him," Hasser snarled.

Leander turned to Overlin. "You better stick around town," he advised. "That feller might get blood poisoning or something and die. There'd be questions in that case."

"I'll stick around," Shell Overlin agreed.

He moved away and the crowd dispersed. Shell Overlin went back to the store, then, and waited until Kenya Wade came out, a sack of groceries in her arms.

"I—I got to thank you a lot, Miss," Overlin stammered, crushing his hat between his hands. "An' I want to apologize because you saw all that. It ain't a-tall nice when men go slingin' lead around."

"It would be nicer," she advised, "if you would take these and carry them home for me." She thrust the sack toward him.

"Can I? I mean—" He grabbed the sack awkwardly.

SHE laughed as they started down the street. There was something so proud and yet so humble about Shell Overlin, Kenya wondered if he thought she were composed of fragile, rare china. She also wondered at her own sudden interest in this strange young cowhand.

"In the first place, you didn't want to fight, and I saw you were a little sick when you were forced to. You did right in what you did," the girl said. "In the second place, what's your name?"

"Shell Overlin," he told her. "I come in with that trail herd."

"And didn't streak for the nearest bar!" She laughed again.

"Well, Shell Overlin, my name is Kenya Wade. I'm glad to know you."

"Wade?" he muttered. "Why that was the name of the man who bought the herd."

"My father . . . We turn here . . . That's our house on the top of the slope."

The house Overlin had admired and had wondered about. He reckoned he had better hurry away from Manzanita. A man like himself, he figured, had no darned business even walking with a girl whose father owned half this county, and who was as nice as Kenya. He halted at the gate in the picket fence.

"I'm thankin' you again, Miss Wade, for helpin' a man like me," he said. "A world of luck to you." He thrust the groceries into her arms, whirled and almost ran down the slope.

As he reached the main street again, he found himself hoping Luke Teed would hurry up and either get well or die, so he could pull out. He hoped Kenya Wade's young man—likely some rich young cowman hereabouts—wouldn't get riled because he'd toted her groceries home.

There was no young man for high-spirited Kenya Wade. None she'd ever been interested in, until Shell Overlin appeared. Overlin could not know that.

He treated himself to the luxury of a restaurant meal and a bed in the hotel that night. Next morning, he went to the jail to see the marshal, and learned that Teed might not lose his arm, but would never use it to draw a gun again.

"Better stick around a day or two more," Leander advised.

Time on his hands, made uncomfortable by the stares of the curious who had ideas he might be another Billy the Kid or a King Fisher with a gun, Overlin got his horse from the feed yard and headed out haphazardly to take a look around.

Two miles west of Manzanita, he slewed in the saddle and looked around, tensed, half-expecting the rider overtaking him to be Ike Hasser. Had it been Hasser, he would not have been as disturbed as he was when he saw the rider was Kenya Wade.

She waved and reined to a walk beside him, pretending surprise at seeing him. She wasn't surprised at all. Truth was, berating herself for her boldness, she had followed Overlin from town.

"Not leaving?" she inquired.

"N-no, Miss Wade," he managed, stricken at sight of her in bright silk blouse, divided skirt and trim little boots. "I was just passin' time, lookin' around."

"Then I'll be the grand hostess and show you a spot I love." She arched her brows inquiringly.

"Yuh-yes'm," gulped Overlin.

HE followed her off the main road and along a trail that led upward into low-lying hills covered with mountain mahogany, greasewood and manzanita. Bands of cattle carrying the W-Rafter-W brand of Ward Wade grazed everywhere.

They picked up a little trickle of water now and the girl followed it upward until the trickle became a little stream.

She went on, where a grove of liveoak studded a hilltop, and pulled up beneath the hoary, moss-festooned trees.

"There," she said, waving one hand.

Overlin looked. A pond had been formed where live springs bubbled up out of the ground and overflowed to form the stream. Moss covered rocks backed the pond, and there were more trees beyond.

"Liveoak Springs," Kenya said, slipping from the saddle.

Overlin looked down over lower hills, over the flat range, back at the springs. "I wish I knew enough about words to tell how it makes me feel," he mumbled.

"You feel that way, too!" she cried, her eyes starry as she seated herself on a rock.

Overlin nodded and sat on the ground nearby.

He didn't, of course, realize it: But in this moment, Shell Overlin's entire life was changed. . . .

CHAPTER III

Insult

IN answer to a question Kenya had asked, Overlin leaned on his elbow and stared into hazy space. "I never knew my mother," he said. "My paw was caught in a cow stampede when I was about seven. I sort of tagged around with the outfit, later driftin' on."

"What purpose have you in life, Shell?"

"Purpose?"

"Yes. What do you like? What appeals to you?"

He pondered this, frowning. "Why, I don't guess I ever give it no thought," he decided. "Things that mean anything to me seem to be a waterhole or a can of tomatoes when I get thirsty; a good hand in a poker game, a full stomach, an' a job when I hit the end of the trail or my money."

"Haven't you ever thought of settling down and having a place of your own?"

"Why, no," he answered, interested. "I never did figger that. An' anyhow—" his face fell— "it'd be almighty lonesome."

"You might get married." Kenya turned her head from him. "You could settle around here, even. There's land left for homesteading."

"You think it'd be a good idea?" He was taking to the idea.

"I think a man like you should have a future," she evaded, rising. Overlin helped her mount, wondering why he felt sort of sacred like, at the touch of her. When they were on their way back, he said abruptly, "I think I might have a try at it."

Almost to Manzanita, they met a rider coming out from town. A tall, dark man, too finely dressed, Overlin thought, Kenya introduced the man as Jack Nero. "Dad's camp foreman," she explained.

Nero inclined his head jerkily, his gaze jealous and sultry. He made a sweeping bow from the saddle as he moved on past Kenya. Overlin had the feeling that Nero hated him because he was riding with Kenya. Well, Nero needn't worry. Miss Kenya was just being kind to him, Overlin figured.

Back in town, he watched Kenya ride on toward her home, put his horse up and went to sit on a bale of hay and study ways and means. He had close to three hundred dollars in his pockets. It had seemed like a lot of money before. Not so much now.

"I'll need a wagon, a team, lumber an' fencin'," he itemized to himself. "I'll need tarpaper an' nails an' supplies." He gazed down the street toward Murphy's Saloon, nodded gravely and divided his money. Two hundred dol-

lars he left in his pants pocket. A hundred he tucked into a worn pouch and stowed away in another pocket.

Five minutes later he was in Murphy's, watching a couple of poker games. One table was filled with cowboys—including a pair off the trail. There were four men at the other table; men whose appearance spelled money, and the run of the game shrieked of it.

Overlin looked at Ward Wade, whom he knew because he'd seen Wade when he'd come out to inspect the herd he'd bought. The other three were cronies of Wade's: a cattle buyer, a banker, a retired rancher.

Wade, graying, broad-shouldered, carried himself like a man used to commanding and having his own way at any costs. Hard-headed, just until he went blind with bullishness was the way Overlin sized him up.

OVERLIN did not know that this game was a weekly habit of the four men, and that a wise man would stay out and save a skinning. All he knew was that he wanted where the big money was, so he approached, touched, the back of an empty chair and politely inquired, "Can I take chips?"

Wade jerked his head up and glowered.

"Oh," he grunted. "You're the frosty that shot that man yesterday. Overlin, I believe. I'm afraid this isn't the game for you, bub. Take your two-bits over to the other game."

"Maybe it ain't much, but it's more than two-bits," Overlin replied civilly, hauling out gold pieces and putting them on the baize. The banker chuckled at Wade.

"Sit down and be educated, then," Wade rapped, angered. "You'll see how long your ante lasts."

Overlin saw, as did a small crowd who'd gathered near the table two hours later. Ward Wade's three friends were having the time of their lives watching Wade get the skin taken off of him, and the way they showed their joy didn't go as balm for Wade's wounded pride. Wade prided himself on his game of poker, and this fool kid was taking him into camp!

Overlin took a pot from Wade. Wade slammed down his cards and ground his teeth. "I'm going to break you out of this game," he swore.

Overlin counted his last chip and shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said. "If I was in a game with poor men, I'd give them a full chance to even. You ain't poor, though, an' I got twelve hundred here—which is all I'll need."

Wade choked, bit his cigar in half. "All—all you'll need!" he roared. "All you need for what?"

"To get goin' on a homestead," said Overlin, cashing in with the cattle buyer who banked the game, since it wasn't with the house.

Overlin did not look back. So he didn't see Wade's cronies leaning over the table, laughing until tears streamed down their cheeks.

"O-ho-ho-migod!" the banker gurgled. "Bad as Wade hates a homesteader, that kid walks in and Wade stakes him to a start on one. Ohhhhh . . ."

"Laugh, you damned old hyenas!" Wade kicked back his chair. "Go on, make a county joke out of this. I'm not through with that cocky young rooster by a hell of a lot."

He strode to the bar and downed a double shot of bourbon neat.

Overlin crossed over and went down the street to the restaurant. He was enjoying the last of his meal when Jack Nero came in. Overlin nodded. Nero eyed him stonily and took a stool several way from Overlin. The jovial Dutchman who ran the place, took Nero's order, brought Overlin a big slab of pie and resumed the conversation

they'd been having.

"Now, py golly, take a feller like you, wants to homestead. There's country above here you should ought to see." He described it in detail. Nero, listening, allowed a thin, mean grin to smear his lips. He'd just heard Wade bellowing about Overlin skinning him. And so Overlin wanted to homestead around here now? Nero hadn't heard that part of it.

BECAUSE Kenya had sided this Overlin, had ridden with him, Nero hated the air Shell Overlin breathed. It griped Nero because he fancied himself as a ladies' man, and Kenya had never given him more than a half-pleasant smile.

When the Dutchman went back to get Nero's order, Wade's camp foreman surprised Overlin by speaking half pleasantly.

"You're huntin' a homestead, eh?" he said. "You'll find the good ones hard to uncover, feller. Big outfits all around, and the land office here none too anxious to help outsiders get in on that stuff." He nodded sagely.

"There's one piece, though, a man could get. I'd take it myself, wasn't I had such a swell job. They'll give you an argument at the land office; maybe say the piece ain't for filin' on. I know better."

Nero looked around. Lowered his voice. "You keep it a secret who told you?"

"Sure," Overlin agreed.

"It's a place called Liveoak Springs," Nero revealed.

Liveoak Springs—the place Kenya Wade loved. Overlin thanked Nero with eagerness and left the restaurant. Once outside, he didn't seem so innocent.

"If that piece is open to homestead, it means Ward Wade is responsible it's open. It furnishes him water, his range is around it. If I ain't doggone mistaken, Mister Nero would like to see me try settlin' there an' reapin' hell."

Overlin frowned. "Still, I got a right to that land, an' Miss Wade suggested I settle down. I ain't popular with ol' Wade, nohow . . . So!"

He headed for the land office to file on Liveoak Springs!

CHAPTER IV

AND INJURY

A STORMY session in the land office, and Shell Overlin proved he had a temper and determination. He came out with his papers and the clerk's heated avowal that Overlin was starting a lot of trouble.

"It'll be my trouble," Overlin declared.

No sooner was he out of the office than the clerk was frantically whirling the handle of the telephone on the wall. And a few seconds later, Ward Wade was exploding over Overlin for the second time that day.

News fanned around Overlin like fire in dry prairie grass. If he recognized the fact that folks were looking upon him as a man marked for misery and maybe death, he gave no sign. Before that day's sun set—red, portending an autumn storm—Overlin had ordered lumber and supplies, bought a team and a fairly good second-hand wagon and was ready to roll out next morning at the crack of dawn.

Coming from the General Merchandisery, Overlin bumped into Ward Wade who came out of his lawyer's office on the main street.

Men who saw the meeting later swore that Wade swelled up visibly. His rasping voice carried along the street.

"You c a n ' t homestead Liveoak

Springs!" Wade thundered. "I need that water in dry spells and I won't have you in the middle of my range. What the hell ever gave you the idea you could overstep like that? Folks around here know enough to stay off Liveoak. That's why nobody's ever filed on it."

"I have, Mister Wade," Overlin respectfully reminded the older man. "As to the water, I reckon you can have what I don't need."

"You—you—" Wade choked and spluttered. "You'll let me have what you don't need. Why, damme, you'll never unload a stick of lumber or an inch of barbed wire up there."

"I think I will," Overlin said, his eyes beginning to brighten.

He had Wade, and Wade knew it. Wade's lawyer had just finished telling him he'd be tangling too deep with the Government trying to keep Overlin off his claim.

"If he gets set, however," the lawyer had slyly suggested, "I don't know any law to keep things from being made mighty tough for him."

"Just—just what do you think you can get away with?" Wade fairly yelled.

"Well," Overlin drawled and grinned aggravatingly, "I can lots of times get away with money in a poker game. As for this Liveoak Spring deal, I sort of figgered somebody might rare back. I wouldn't be surprised if your hand, Jack Nero, didn't suggest I file there just so I'd get in trouble."

"Nero?" Wade bawled. "Why, you lying young—"

"Don't say that, Wade!" Overlin rapped, looking Wade straight in the eyes. Ward Wade was nobody's damned fool, for all his highhanded mulishness. He clamped his mouth shut and kept it that way as Overlin turned and walked on back up the street.

Ward Wade stormed the street, then, and brave man fled before his wrath. He cornered Jack Nero in the barber shop and held his voice and his temper in check as he got his camp foreman aside.

"Did you tell that damned upstart Overlin to file on Liveoak Springs?" he demanded.

NERO squirmed. "Ah, Wade," he muttered, "it was just a joke. I saw him ridin' with Miss Kenya, and figured you wouldn't like it—"

"You'll leave her out of this!" Wade snapped, the fires of his anger flaming higher. So his girl had ridden with Overlin—and Ward Wade knew there wasn't a damn thing he could do about that. Kenya was a young lady with a mind of her very own, as Wade had learned. Now he knew Overlin would have to be gotten out of this country.

"Well, I was horsin'," Nero defended. "I thought the damn fool would know better. It was a joke."

"Ha-ha," Wade sneered. "A joke. Well, it's on you. Let Overlin get on his claim. And then you see the joke in making him get off! I don't want a killing if it can be helped. But you either have him off in a week, or you quit!"

"I'll have him off," Nero growled.

It was raining and cold the next morning when Shell Overlin tied his saddle horse to the tailgate of his loaded wagon and headed his team for Liveoak Springs.

An entirely different Overlin than the aimless cowhand of a few days ago, he was already sensing the deep pride that comes with possession; he was figuring on the number of head of beef his land would support, visualizing the cabin he aimed to build.

Arrived at the springs, he climbed off the wagon seat and faced the rain, looking over the storm-swept hills below him.

"It's nice," he told himself. "I aim

to stick."

He picked a cabin site behind the rocks rimming the pond, where the great liveoak trees swept on upward toward a tableland. He went right to work, and the next three days passed quickly.

It rained all of those days and Overlin was soaked to the skin most of the time—but he didn't care. He had a shed and a corral built for his stock and the roof was on the cabin. The morning of the fourth day, Overlin had a visitor: Kenya Wade.

He waited in humble silence while she inspected his work. Then, without ado, she whirled on him, hands spread appealingly.

"Did you have to do this, Shell?"

"You mean homestead here? Why, no. But I'm like you, some, in that I love this spot, too. I had a right to homestead here."

"I won't love it if it causes bloodshed," Kenya said sadly. "And it will, Shell. Believe me, it will. Men are laughing at my father because you won the money from him to take away the springs. He's proud, and he won't stand for it."

"You said a man should settle an' have a future," Overlin defended.

"You'll have no future trying to stay here!" she cried. "Oh, Shell, can't you understand? I feel responsible. I gave you the idea of settling. Yet I can't turn against my own father, can I?"

"Why, no," he agreed, wide-eyed. "Who'd even think you would?"

She saw, then, that Shell Overlin did not understand how she might feel toward him. He didn't. It would never occur to Overlin that Kenya Wade might be in love with him.

So he didn't understand, either, why she took to saddle so quickly with a choked cry, "This is impossible! Go away, Shell, before you get hurt and I'll be to blame."

He guessed, a little sadly, the girl was mad because folks were laughing at her father. Well, he couldn't help that now. Disturbed, he left off work, got his old carbine and walked through the trees up toward the tableland above, hoping to get rid of his restlessness and pick up a rabbit or a couple of crested quail.

RETURNING empty-handed an hour later, Overlin had an odd sense of danger as he approached his shack. It was this premonition that caused him to keep to the brush and trees. He hunkered, looking beyond the pond, and caught the motion of a horse tied in the brush down there.

He caught sound, then, of something crashing—like canned goods falling—in the shack. A bleak, cold expression on his face, Overlin crept on down, edged around the cabin and flattened himself beside the doorway. A man's hand appeared, holding a cocked six-gun. Jack Nero came out cautiously. The gun exploded harmlessly as Overlin struck down with his rifle barrel.

Overlin kicked the fallen weapon away, placed his carbine just inside the doorway. Nero was backing slowly away, nursing his wrist with his left hand.

"Figgerin' your heft an' build, that hand'll make us about even," Overlin snarled. "You've ruint most of my supplies in there, an' smashed the furniture I had made. I aim to do about the same to you."

Nero cursed and swung. Overlin waded in. Fists crunched on flesh and bone, and Nero's cursing changed, became a sob, and then a plea, and then he was silent. . . .

That evening, Ward Wade opened his front door in answer to someone's knocking. Wade stared open mouthed at the battered, unrecognizable pulp that once had been dapper Jack Nero. Nero swayed, braced himself and tried

to peer through closed, puffed eyes.

"You told me to get him off the claim in a week, or quit," Nero croaked. "I thought he was gone away today. He wasn't. He's still up there, bigod. And me—I *quit!*"

CHAPTER V

Get Along Doggies

THREE days after breaking the body and nerve of Jack Nero, Shell Overlin drove into Manzanita in the face of a cold, driving wind. He left his wagon and team at the feed lot and went straight to Murphy's Saloon.

A lot of the male population had holed in there to escape the unseasonable cold weather. Along the bar, around the big pot-bellied stove, conversation lulled when Overlin appeared. Still weaponless, Ike Hasser glowered murderously as Overlin passed near him. Profanity framed on Hasser's lips, but the presence of Marshal Leander down the bar kept Hasser silent.

"Howdy, marshal," Overlin greeted, edging in beside Leander.

Leander nodded and said "Howdy" in a half-frightened manner, casting a quick look toward the table where Ward Wade and the banker sat waiting for their other poker playing cronies to arrive.

"Never mind bein' afraid I'll ask for anything from you an' get you Wade's displeasure," Overlin grunted. "I just wanted to ask about Luke Teed."

"He rode out of town yesterday," Leander muttered. "Arm'll never be no good the doctor says. Teed was headin' for another doctor in Dell City. But you'll notice that Hasser stayed behind. Damn it, Overlin, you've caused too much trouble and after what you done to Nero, you got no business coming here."

"That'll be for me to say," Overlin replied. He looked over and caught Wade's eyes on him. The cattleman was leaning over the table, mutilating the cards in front of him. He sucked in a long breath and fairly exhaled fire as Overlin took slow steps toward him. Not another man in the saloon made a move or spoke a word.

"G'day, Mister Wade," Overlin said civilly.

"To hell with you!" Wade bawled. "What is it you want?"

"Don't worry—I'm not playin' poker today," Overlin said.

Someone snickered and then shut up quickly.

"I come in to ask you to pay me for the grub an' supplies your camp foreman, Jack Nero, destroyed," Overlin explained.

"You—what?" Wade sat back, his mouth opened.

"I figger you know what I mean, Wade."

"I know you busted Nero and he pulled his freight," Wade snarled. "But what he did to your supplies was no affair of mine."

"It was an' is," Overlin contradicted.

Wade whanged the table with his clenched fists and bared his teeth at Overlin. Overlin, in a calm, unruffled manner that aggravated Wade still further, shook his head slowly.

"You oughtn't take on so, Wade," he warned. "I knowed a man, once, who got up head like you're doin'. It overweighted him so much they had to fill the seat of his britches with rocks to keep that head from unbalancin' him an' chunkin' him on his face."

"It'll be your face that gets chunked on," Wade managed. He restrained another outburst of temper. "Overlin," he went on, "I admire you for sticking up for yourself. But not as the damned

fool you are in what you're doing. I'll give you one chance—"

"You'll give me nothin'!" Overlin snapped. "Its me that's givin' you a chance. Wade, I'm stringin' fence. Me—I don't like 'bobwire' no better than any other cowhand, but Government says I got to fence so much of my claim. I'm doin' 'er.

"Now. I can put up a tight fence. I can block a trail you use to the upper range beyond me an' cause you to put in a helluva long drift fence to turn your stuff up there. That's if you won't pay me for what stuff Nero ruint.

"Pay me, an' maybe, when time comes you need water from the springs, you'll find my fence loose, with a lot of Oklahoma gates in it, an' your way to upper range won't be shut off."

WADE'S breathing was heavy and loud in the silence of the saloon. He made as if to rise, settled back in his chair.

"Put your fence up good and tight—and see can you keep it there!" he answered Overlin.

"I'm sorry," Overlin stated, genuine regret in his voice. "I hate to have to back my rights with a rifle. But, havin' to, I draw a pretty straight bead, Mister Wade."

His footsteps echoed hollowly as he turned and tramped deliberately from Murphy's saloon.

Overlin dug postholes and strung barbed wire throughout the following week, his rifle always within ready reach. He didn't realize it, but every rider limned on distant horizons, every sound that caused him to drop hammer and staples and grab his gun, brought hope as well as hard alertness. Hope that the rider or the cause of the sound would be Kenya Wade.

Overlin didn't realize he hoped because he did not reason that he existed to Kenya Wade save as her father's enemy.

Kenya didn't show up. But on a chill morning when the skies lay low and leaden and pregnant with unborn snow, some of Ward Wade's cowhands did.

West of Liveoak Springs was the long draw up which drifted Wade cattle to graze on the tableland. Overlin had finished driving the Wade cattle back toward the range below and had run his fence solidly together after them.

That done, he showed the wisdom that could have been expected from a much older man—worked on the warranted supposition he was b e i n g watched. He sacked his hammer and pliers, mounted his horse and rode back toward his shack.

Out of sight in a wetwash gully, he dismounted, drew his rifle from the boot and worked his way back to a brushy eminence overlooking the draw between the hills.

He lay there with a rising wind rippling the shortgrass and moaning through the scrub; a lonesome wind that made Overlin—ever a lone, lonesome young man—wonder what the hell possessed him that he'd grabbed this claim and was hanging on so tenaciously.

He couldn't have answered himself had he had the time—which he didn't. Steers bawled out of sight and down the slope below him, and then started showing around a turn of the trail up the draw, a cowboy well ahead of them, three more chasing the tails of the little herd. Overlin recognized one big, orey-eyed blaze-faced steer as one he'd hazed off his land not more than three-four hours before.

Overlin played Indian, watching the puncher ahead as he came to the fence, drew wire cutters from his mackinaw pocket and dismounted. He continued to wait until the man put his cutters to the top strand of wire, aiming to cut it close to the post.

Overlin drew a careful bead and squeezed his trigger.

The puncher seemed to rise straight in the air as he came backward, a look of wild consternation on his face. The fence post jerked and slivers flew out of it.

The men tailing the herd pulled up, guns coming clear as they frantically sought out the source of the shot. The man at the fence fell, rolled over, gained his feet and ran bowlegged toward his horse. Overlin drew another bead and waited until the fellow reached for his saddlehorn, then fired again. The horn half disappeared, rawhide wrapping uncurling with a writhing snap. The cowhand held one arm before his eyes as he stumbled backward. His horse struggled up the side of the draw.

THE poor misguided turned, saw the oncoming steers, flung himself down and rolled under the fence, putting its protecting strands between himself and the herd. He stood up, then, waving his hands high above his head.

A six-gun cracked and the bullet clipped grass to one side of Overlin.

"Stop 'at!" he bellowed. "Next shot at me, I'll start cuttin' hunks off your partner. You hear me yell?"

"Migod, don't shoot," squalled the unfortunate behind the fence.

"Let him go an' we'll slope, damn you," one of the other three yelled at Overlin.

"You'll all slope," Overlin assured him. "But first, you're goin' to drop you guns an' h'ist your paws, then ride up. Drop 'em, damn you!" He laid a bullet past them for emphasis.

First one, then the others dropped their guns and rode their horses through the spreading, drifting cattle and pulled up on the slope just below Overlin. He waited for the man behind the fence to catch up his mount and join the others. Then he stood up and grinned wryly down at them.

Sort of got your tails in the crack, ain't you?" he inquired.

One man grinned sheepishly. Another cursed.

"Was you aimin' to kill me?" Overlin probed further.

"Hell, no. Orders was not to, but to roughhouse you plenty, you got in our way," one rider growled.

"Looks like you sort of failed on both your counts," Overlin observed. "Well, it's too cold to stand here an' jaw." His words took on snap now. "Shift yourse'fs!" he commanded. "Turn around an' face the rear ends of your horses, an' maybe you'll learn somethin'."

Fifteen minutes later, four cussing, threatening cowhands had been tied with their own ropes, hands back of them lashed to their saddle horns as they faced their horses' tails.

"Get for home, li'l dogies," Overlin jeered, and gave the nearest horse a smart slap on the rump.

CHAPTER VI

Big Ante

COMING into Murphy's for his mid-morning drink of bourbon, Ward Wade paused to glare around at the half dozen customers. He was defying them, daring a single son of them to snicker or drop a remark about Wade cowhands adopting the custom of riding backward. Wade had his stomach full of that these last two days, and the more he got the more it soured him.

Secretly, Wade might have been a little amused at such a stunt. But, coming as an added insult piled upon all the other rusties Shell Overlin had cut on him, Wade's possible amusement was lost in a morass of temper and de-

termination to get even.

He jerked his head up and scowled warningly when Ike Hasser moved up beside him.

"Well?" Wade snapped.

"I could use a job—maybe," Ike Hasser began.

"You ought to know nobody's taking on hands this time of year," Wade rasped.

"Well, I wouldn't ask for a job—a good one—until somebody told the marshal, Leander, to let me pack my gun again," Hasser said.

Wade reared back and glared. "You suggesting I give you a job gunning out Overlin?" he demanded.

"Uh-uh. Just figger it this way: Teed was my friend. This damn kid tromped us because he was lucky. Hell, I don't get level with him, I'll be laughed at ever'where I show up. Suppose, now, I had my gun back. Suppose I proved I was better than Overlin —got the drop on him, made him crawl, run him out?"

"I'd bet all I got you'd never make him crawl," Wade growled. He shook his head. "If he was shown up, that would help. I—Nope, Hasser. I want no killing laid to me."

"Be no killin', Hasser grunted. He shrugged. "Well, I guess if you can stand to have your range split, be beaten at poker, have your men beat up or put backside on their horses—"

"Stop it!" Wade's complexion crimsoned with anger.

"Hasser, you'll get your gun back—but no killing. Understand?"

"Oh, sure," Hasser replied.

Later, Wade expressed satisfaction over the fact, "That cocky Overlin won't be a burr under my blanket much longer now," and the knowledge that Ike Hasser was packing a gun and making his brags that Overlin would be scarce around Manzanita now, caused Kenya to saddle her horse and head for Liveoak Springs.

She felt her breath jerk when Overlin opened his door. He had a hard time breathing himself at sight of her. He stumbled over his greetings, and over his own feet as he stepped back to allow her to enter. He pushed a bench forward for her and sat on a box where he was sure to miss no word or movement of hers.

"Shell, what do you intend to do?" Kenya roused herself and came to the point.

"Do? You mean about here? Stick it out, I reckon. I started out here. I aim to finish what I start."

"Shell, listen." She leaned forward. "I say again, I feel responsible. I also say that you are just as much in the wrong as my father."

"You mean I shouldn't've whipped Nero an' sent them cowhands home like I done?"

"No, Shell. My father was wrong there. I—Oh, try to understand! In the first place, you humiliated my father by winning from him the money to come here in the middle of his range and take a claim that nobody else had ever dared—or wanted to—file on.

"My father is getting old. He is stubborn, Shell, and proud. Just as you, in a younger way, are stubborn and proud.

"There was the matter of his paying for the supplies Nero ruined. Shell, why couldn't you have waited, seen my father alone? Did you have to hunt him out in Murphy's and demand payment before everyone? Did you back down before those two killers? Of course not! Did you expect Ward Wade to back down from you?—even if his position was wrong."

OVERLIN fumbled with the tobacco tag hanging from his shirt pocket. He blinked at Kenya, then at his boots.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "You see, it never showed to me like that. I know

your father wasn't tryin' to have me kilt, an' I could've gone at things different. Yeah, I can see that now."

"Then do something," Kenya begged.

"If you mean movin' off this claim—no!" Overlin blurted. "I got my pride, too. But maybe there'd be other ways." Hopefully.

"Perhaps." She was just as vague as he. "If there are, Shell Overlin, find those ways."

"You don't need to be afraid your father an' me'll have 'er out personal," Overlin assured her.

Kenya rose suddenly, stepped over and rested a hand on his shoulder.

"That isn't the only reason I'm asking you to find a way out of this," she said softly. She caught her lips between her teeth, blushed, then bent and kissed him swiftly.

She turned and fled, leaving him sitting stunned, wide-eyed, not awakened yet.

"Shell Overlin," she cried back at him, "in some ways, you are the biggest fool alive!"

It wasn't until she was several miles away that Kenya remembered she hadn't warned Overlin about Ike Hasser's threats, and it was getting too late for her to turn back.

Overlin himself went through the rest of the day in a daze. Kenya—Why, dammit to hell, she must love him! She'd kissed him!

He could hardly realize it, and tried to bring himself back to earth by figuring a way to pacify Ward Wade, yet not sacrifice his own stand, his pride, his avowed intention of sticking here. He had to hang and rattle now. Kenya loved Liveoak Springs, and the springs were Overlin's chance at a start in life.

"Havin' a future's tougher than stickin' a outlaw brawnk buckin' through prickly pear," he groaned as he piled into his bunk that night.

Lying there, going off to sleep, Overlin said "Damn!" and sat up in his bunk.

He sat grinning into the darkness for a long time, running his plan over and over in his mind.

"Why didn't I think of that before?" he demanded of himself as he lay down again. He dropped immediately off to sleep, untroubled because the way before him—he thought—was clear.

He was up at daylight next morning, downed hot coffee and rode toward Manzanita through a light, covering fall of snow.

ARRIVED in town, Overlin went directly to the land office, asked a few questions, went from there to the office of Ward Wade's lawyer and learned he was out of town, so sought the services of the town's second attorney-at-law.

He left there tucking papers into his shirt pocket under his blanket-lined canvas coat. Snowfall was increasing as he walked toward Murphy's Saloon. Overlin grinned as he saw Ward Wade and Kenya coming up the street the other way. They failed to see him. Kenya turned into the Merchandisery and her father went on.

Overlin speeded his pace, then halted abruptly, skidding a little on the snow-covered boardwalk.

His coat unbuttoned and thrust back, hand on the butt of his six-gun, Ike Hasser stepped out of the town's saddle shop directly into Overlin's path and not four yards in front of him.

He hunched his shoulders as he grinned evilly at Overlin.

Overlin saw Ward Wade looking up this way; saw a couple of men staring from across the street out of the corners of his eyes.

Hasser had the edge on him. Overlin's coat was going to hamper his draw, he knew. And, looking into Hasser's eyes, Overlin knew he'd have to

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try and draw. He tensed, swallowed a couple of times, went into action as Hasser's right hand came up.

CHAPTER VII

BLUE CHIPS

OVERLIN was pushing back his coat with his left hand, his fingers touching the cold grips of his gunbutt when Ike Hasser fired. The bullet struck Overlin a terrible, stunning blow that hurled him half around and dropped him on his side.

Hasser fired once more, the slug striking close to Overlin's body, ripping into the walk.

Overlin didn't know he was grunting, whining with effort. He didn't hear Hasser shout and start to line his gun on Overlin again. Overlin didn't even hear the report of his own gun, nor feel the recoil that kicked it out of his weakening grasp.

He saw Hasser as a high, blurred, falling figure with a hole above the bridge of his nose where Overlin's bullet had centered. Then Hasser fell out of sight. Shell Overlin sobbed once, then fell back, motionless, his eyes closed.

That was the way he lay when Ward Wade came running up the street, others at his heels. That was the way Kenya Wade found him as she pushed through the thickening ring of men and dropped to her knees, calling Shell Overlin's name.

The doctor came, shook his head and ordered that Overlin be carried to his office. Ward and Kenya Wade refused to be barred, and the doctor admitted them.

"I—I shouldn't have taken Hasser's word," Wade mourned.

"Never mind. Give a hand," the

doctor ordered. "Here, I got to get his coat off."

They stripped Overlin's coat off and the doctor started to open his blood-wet shirt. He paused to pull a paper out of the shirt pocket and handed it to Wade with the comment, "Better see what it is. I doubt he'll ever come out of this. Bullet went in the left breast. Can't see how it missed the heart. . . ."

Shaking his head, Ward Wade started to unfold the paper taken from Overlin's shirt pocket. He paused to wipe blood off of it, push back the rough edges where the bullet that had gotten Overlin had pierced the paper.

Kenya, her face white and strained, paid no attention to Ward Wade until she heard him groan. She spun around.

Ward Wade sagged down limply in a chair, and never, never in her life had Kenya believed a man could seem, appear so utterly miserable.

"What is it?" she cried.

Wade looked at her strickenly as he extended the paper.

"It's a—a sort of deed, or assignment," he choked. "Overlin had signed over to the unlimited water rights and right of passage across his place! And—and I caused him to be killed!"

"He isn't dead yet," the doctor snapped. "And I'm not so sure he'll die."

Too weak to move, Overlin lay and rolled his eyes at Kenya, then at Ward Wade, on the other side of his bed.

"It's been a hell of a week for you, and me, too," Wade croaked. "For all of us. Overlin, it was my fault Hasser got his gun back. Then he almost killed you when you came in to make a decent offer of peace to me. Why, hell's bells, I'm safer with you on Live-oak Springs than I was when it was open to entry."

"It's all right," Overlin whispered.

"It's not all right, you fighting, poker playing young devil!" Wade

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29x5.00-19	2.85	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
6.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.55
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32x6.50-20	3.75	1.75
6.00-16	3.75	1.45

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32x4½	3.35	1.45

Size	Tires	Tubes
33x4½	$3.45	$1.45
34x4½	3.45	1.45
30x5	3.65	1.65
33x5	3.75	1.75
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Size	Tires	Tubes
34x7	$10.95	$4.65
38x7	10.95	4.65
36x8	11.45	4.95
40x8	13.25	4.95

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.75	$1.65
6.50-20	4.45	1.95
7.00-20	5.95	2.95

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7.50-20	$6.95	$3.75
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fairly howled, causing the doctor to stick his head into the room.

"It'll never be right, Overlin," Wade went on. "Man, I hope you stay here the rest of your life. I'll do anything to help you, give you anything I've got."

"You're exciting him," the doctor growled at Wade. "Come on out. Uh, I guess Kenya can remain." The doctor smiled at the way Overlin was weakly gripping Kenya's hand.

"I'll give you anything," Wade repeated, pausing in the doorway.

"I'm goin' to take you up on that," Overlin said, more strongly. He smiled up at Kenya. "I'm goin' to take the most precious thing you got, Wade."

Ward Wade blew his nose when the doctor closed the door after them.

"Damn weather. Gives a man a cold," he grunted. Then he chuckled.

"Going to be some damn fine poker players for my grandchildren some of these days. Bet a stack of blues on that."

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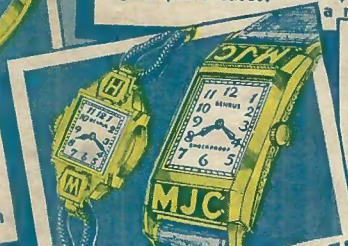

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